

SIVA PURANA

The Ancient Book of Siva



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Ramesh Menon

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To Sri Ramana Maharishi

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Acknowledgement

The late Parameshwara Iyer, who translated the entire Siva Purana into English from the Sanskrit for Motilal Banarsidass, was my teacher for a time. Except for his painstaking endeavour, this book, which is based upon his scholarly translation, would have never been written.

A Word

The length and breadth of India is strewn with temples that have a startling commonality of themes. Increasingly, I do not believe the Puranas, the books that describe these themes, are merely fictions of men of old. Rather, they seem to describe a human history more primal than the one of a few thousand years to which we habitually think of ourselves as belonging. In the Puranas, we see reflections of a cosmic history, when this earth was open to the universe.

It is difficult to accept that the greatest glory of ancient India was the drainage system of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa. We know, from modern cosmology, that the universe is much older, vaster and more complex than we imagined a hundred years ago. We know our own history is less than a speck against universal horizons of space and time. It is absurd that we pass any judgement whatever on a universe in which we are such infants: that we dare say 'This is so and this not in the cosmos'. Surely, our human history is an infinitesimal part of the history of the universe, not vice versa; and our ignorance is far more profound than our knowledge.

The characters in the Purana are 'cosmic' in dimension, even the lesser ones; as is the sweep of time, space and spirit we encounter here. We can easily dismiss it all as the exaggerated fantasies of nameless writers of the dim past. Or else, we begin to suspect there is more to learn here than we dreamt: that human history is fundamentally different from what we have been taught.

The beings we meet in the Puranas are godlike, grandly demonical and incomprehensible when we compare them to ourselves. They live for thousands of years, fly in sky chariots, vimanas fleet as thought, command great astras: weapons that consume whole cities in a wink.

This book is the Siva Purana condensed, rearranged and retold, I hope in more contemporary and imaginative style than is generally available in English. Much of it deals with characters and events that are incredible by our humdrum perspective. But is it possible that beginningless Siva, of the eight cosmic bodies, the fire from whose third eye ends the universe, Brahma, the four-headed Creator and four-armed

Vishnu, who sleeps on an infinite sea, are not imaginary beings, but inconceivable Masters of the stars?

In the Purana, we find this description of time, which is hardly the invention of brutish man scrabbling to create the spoke and the ploughshare:

The basic unit of life is the nimesha, the instant. Fifteen nimeshas make one kasha, thirty kashas one kaala, thirty kaalas one muhurta and thirty muhurtas one day. Thirty days is a maasa, a month, which is one day of the gods and ancestors; six maasas make an ayana, two ayanas a year. One human year is a day and a night for the celestials, uttarayana being the day and dakshinayana the night. Three hundred and sixty-five human years make a divine one.

Four are the yugas in the land of Bharata: the krita, treta, dwapara and kali. The pristine krita lasts 4,800 divine years, the less perfect treta 3,600 years, the half-corrupt dwapara 2,400 and the almost entirely evil kali 1,200.

A chaturyuga, one cycle of four ages, is 12,000 godly years long, 12,000 x 365 human years. 71 chaturyugas make a manvantara, 14 manvantaras a kalpa. A kalpa, of 1000 chaturyugas, 12 million divine years, is one day of Brahma, the Creator.

8,000 years of Brahma make one Brahma yuga; 1,000 Brahma yugas make a savana. Each Brahma lives for 3,003 savanas.

A day of Brahma's has 14 Indras, his life 54,000 Indras.

One day of Vishnu is the lifetime of Brahma.

One day of Siva is the lifetime of Vishnu...

Can it be that our past was more than what we think? Was it, in its way, inconceivably superior to the present?

By the Puranic calendar, we live today at the outset of a kali yuga. Thus, Rama lived in the world more than 800,000 years ago and Krishna 5,000, at least: at two ends of the last dwapara yuga. According to the Purana, it is natural for men of the kali yuga to be puny and short-lived and for them to forget the Sanatana Dharma and the eternal Gods. For this is the very nature of the evil age. It is also the sinister 'Iron Age' of Greek legend, when the Gods seldom visit the earth, anymore, or beget sons on

the daughters of men. It is the time when our darkling planet is sealed from the rest of the universe.

However, my purpose in writing this book was not to rearrange the reader's notion of history, but to present the Spirit of Siva, auspicious, complex and immortal God, as best as I can, with as much devotion as I have, from material found in the Siva Purana.

Introduction

The sacred Puranas have come down to us in the great oral tradition of the rishis, the sages of Bharatavarsha. Once, the peerless Vyasa composed them from ‘ancient material’: *ancient for him*. Traditionally, a Purana deals with five subjects, called panchalakshana: the primary creation of the universe; secondary creation after periodic destruction; the genesis of the Gods and rishis; great epochs of time, the kalpas, manvantaras, yugas; and the history of some royal dynasties of the earth.

More recently, after BC 4000, until AD 1000, roughly, a lot of other material has grown around the central Purana. These concern rituals for sacrifices, other customs, festivals, caste customs, specifications for temple construction, etcetera. There are 18 principal surviving Mahapuranas, great Puranas. The Siva Purana is one of these. They are collections of revelations, in the form of stories, or otherwise, usually narrated to some rishis by a Suta, who heard them from Vyasa, who heard them from Narada, Brahma or another fabulous raconteur, in time out of mind. They have come down, invariably, in Sanskrit couplets.

The Siva Purana is considerably longer than the portions of it I have included in this book. My aim was not to undertake a scholarly translation, of which there are a few, but to write as readable a version as I could, without diminishing the spirit and the scope of the original. For example, large sections of the original deal with intricate rituals and others list all of Siva’s thousand names, with their meanings. I have only touched upon these, which hold little narrative appeal for the ordinary reader.

Also, the sequence of tales in the recorded Purana is often different from mine; but I have retained all the important legends of Siva. In some sections, I have taken stylistic and fictive liberties: but never changing the meaning and flavour of the original. No doubt, generations of pauranikas, in the oral tradition, did the same.

The Puranic tradition is mainly lost to those of us that do not know Sanskrit and lack the patience to plough through scholarly translations, many of which tend to dispense with the poetic magic of the originals. These luminous stories are our race’s very soul. The days when we would hear them at our grandmothers’ knees are over. We know less of them than

our parents did and our children shall know even less than we do. My book seeks to restore the Siva Purana to the English-speaking Indian in some small measure and, hopefully, to preserve it for a time in our consciousness. It also seeks to introduce the non-Indian reader to another, perhaps rare, facet of our heritage. I am aware that an English rendering cannot remotely approach the Sanskrit in depth or resonance: I pray that I have not trivialised the Purana.

The Beginning: RUDRA, SATI.

ONE

On the Yamuna

Once, the celibate Parasara, immortal rishi on his pilgrimage, arrived on the banks of the Yamuna. It was a crisp winter morning. The river sparkled as if a million jewels were strewn across its water. In his hut, the fisherman sat at his morning meal of last night's fish and rice, when the austere figure loomed in his door.

"Take me across the river, I am in a hurry!" said Parasara ungraciously.

It was not the first time the sage had passed this way and the fisherman recognised him. He called to his daughter, "Matsyagandhi, take our Muni Parasara across."

She appeared at the corner of the hut, sixteen and bright as a bit of winter sun. Breast buds strained like young lotuses against her green blouse; eyes like saucers on her lean dark face gazed frankly at Parasara. Without a word, Matsyagandhi led the illustrious one to the wooden boat tethered to a stake on the riverbank.

As he followed her, the smell of the girl's body invaded him: the raw smell of fish with which she was born. That sage, who had felt no twinge of desire for fawning apsaras in devaloka, was overcome by the earthy whiff of the fisher-girl; instead of being repulsed, Parasara lost his heart to her.

When she helped him into the boat, he held her hand longer than he needed. She freed herself quietly and cast off.

However, he would not so easily be denied. As they moved out, Parasara again reached for her hand on the oar at which she rowed. She smiled at him, her great eyes twinkling. She stopped rowing and they drifted in midstream; but she did not withdraw her hand. His hand quivered on hers.

In a husky voice, she said, "You are a high brahmana descended from Brahma and I am a nishada's daughter. Between us this isn't proper, holy one."

Then she trembled: suppose he cursed her. At that moment, her father hailed them faintly from the bank. He stood washing his hands outside the hut and wanted to know why they had stopped. Parasara released the girl's hand. She rowed again while the rishi kept a watch on the fisherman. Soon, the sage took Matsyagandhi's hand once more.

She said, "Brahmana, aren't you repelled by my smell? Muni, don't you know the Vedas say one should not have sexual intercourse during the day? Besides, my father can see us."

When Parasara leaned forward awkwardly to kiss her, she was reminded sharply of his great age; and both excited and dismayed by it. He waved a slender arm over his head in an occult mudra. Instantly, they were shrouded in mist and the fisherman could not see them any more. Then it began to snow!

It was dark on the boat on the river.

"Is that night enough?"

Little Matsyagandhi cried out in wonder. But being a virgin and afraid, she said, "You will enjoy me and go your way, Yogin, but I will become pregnant. Whatever will I tell my father?"

He cried hoarsely, "Give me your love and you will have fame forever among the devas and the rishis. They will call you Satyavati in heaven. Look."

Another wizardly mudra from him and she saw her body glow with new beauty. Her limbs were lustrous, her features finer and now she smelt of wild jasmine, lotus and other unearthly fragrances. In a moment, they spread from her for a yojana. Her original, fishy musk had not vanished either; it became a sublimely erotic scent, making his ardour fiercer!

Still, she hesitated. She restrained his wandering hand, so he cried, "Say whatever you want and it shall be yours. Quickly, you are driving me mad!"

After a moment's reflection, she said, "If no one ever knows this happened, if my virginity is restored, if the son born of our love is a magician like you and if I always smell as sweetly as I do now, then take me, Muni!"

Parasara laughed like rolling thunder. "This is God's will. All your conditions will be met and *your son shall be the greatest poet the world has ever known.*"

He took her in his arms in the boat on the Yamuna, while his snowstorm held its opaque curtain around them. Impatient for him, now that her fears were allayed, she rowed to an island in the stream and moored there. They lay together, unlikeliest lovers, heating the pale sand dry.

After he drank deeply of her youth and she of his age, Parasara rose away from her to bathe in the Yamuna. With a last kiss on top of her head, he walked upon the water and out of her life.

In that mystic dimension, she went into labour as soon as she conceived. Her delivery was miraculous and she felt no pain. Immediately as he was born, her boy, bright as the sun, handsome as Kamadeva, grew into a full-grown rishi, with a kamandalu in one hand, a smooth staff in the other and his tawny hair lit in a halo. The new-born and exceptional hermit said to his mother, "I must go my way. But if you ever want to see me, think of me and I will appear before you" and he walked away.

Since he was born on the dwipa in the Yamuna, Satyavati's son was called Dwaipayana. Later, he was to divide the holy Veda and to compose the sacred Puranas from ancient revelations. He was to become renowned as Veda Vyasa.

It is from Vyasa that we first hear about the Auspicious One, about Siva.

TWO

In the Naimisa vana

*Obeisance to Siva with Uma beside him, his ganas and his sons.
Obeisance to the Lord of Prakriti and Purusha, the cause of creation,
nurture and destruction.*

*I seek refuge in Siva whose power is unequalled, whose glory
spreads everywhere, who is Un-born!*

*

Some rishis from the six noble families begin a yagna in the Naimisa forest, at Prayaga, confluence of the Ganga and the Yamuna, from where a subtle path leads to Brahmaloaka. The Suta Romaharshana, peerless raconteur, whose sacred lore can make one's hair stand on end, hears about the sacrifice. He is one of Vedavyasa's five sishyas to whom his guru imparted the Purana he composed from antique revelations. Romaharshana is a most erudite pauranika, a master of syllogisms, who can answer the metaphysical queries of Brihaspati himself. This Suta, who is a seer and a poet, a mahakavi, arrives in the Naimisa.

Saunaka's rishis are delighted. They receive him with honour; they worship him. They settle him into a darbhasana and say, "Omniscient Romaharshana, ocean of the eldest lore, tell us the holy Siva Purana."

Romaharshana begins in his majestic voice, "I bow to the splendid Rishi Vyasa, who blessed me with the Purana. Vedavyasa said to me,

‘When a long time had elapsed after the Beginning, when many kalpas had come and gone and this one's civilisation was established, a dispute arose among the rishis of the six clans. One said "This is the greatest God," and another disagreed. They set off to see Brahma, the Creator. They went to Mount Meru, to Devaparvata where devas and asuras, siddhas and charanas, yakshas and gandharvas roam, to Sumeru, four-armed swastika, mountain at the crux of the world, Ratnasanu, jewel peak, Hemadri, the golden mountain.

They came to a Brahmavana there, ten yojanas wide and a hundred long, luminous with lakes and rills. They saw a city brilliant as the midday sun, its portals and ramparts licking the sky. Golden and silver mansions lined its thousand streets: each one as big as a palace, every one embedded with unearthly jewels. At the heart of the secret city, the Lord Brahma lived in the greatest edifice.

In his ineffable court, the rishis saw the Creator like molten gold, wearing white silk. He was utterly gentle, his eyes large as lotus petals, his body draped with celestial garlands. His lustre was everywhere; his fragrance was like a river flowing kalaharas in spring. Saraswati sat at his side, the cowries of fate in her hand. The rishis glowed to see the four-faced Lord. They joined their palms above their heads; they hymned him, "Obeisance to you, ancient Purusha, source of creation, life and death. Obeisance, O Brahma, great Atman. Obeisance to you who has the universe for his body!"

In his oceanic voice, Brahma said, "Welcome, Rishis of splendour. Tell me why you have all come here together."

The leader of the sages said, "We are taken with darkness, we don't know who the greatest God is. You are the creator of the universe, the cause of all causes; nothing is hidden from you. Tell us, Lord, who is the most ancient one of all? Who is the greatest Purusha? Who is the purest, most perfect being?"

Brahma shut all his eyes and was lost briefly in himself. Opening them again, the Pitama said softly, "Rudra."

Plucking a wheel of light from the air, like a sliver of the sun, he cast it down into the world. "Where the hub of the wheel breaks offer your worship to Siva."

The blinding wheel whirled down the mountains. It broke against an age-smoothed and auspicious crag in a forest: this Naimisa vana! Ever since, this has been holy ground, sanctified for revelation. Here the first Purana was given to men,' said my guru Vyasa."

Thus, the Suta begins, his body swaying to the rhythms of his plumbless tale.

"Incomparable Suta, tell us how Siva is worshipped," says Saunaka, chief among those sages of the forest, thirsty for the occult Purana.

"Siva is worshipped both as murti and linga," says Romaharshana gravely.

Saunaka says, "All the other Gods are worshipped just as idols. Why is only Siva worshipped as both image and phallus?"

Suta says, "Siva alone is nishkaala, nameless and formless, as well as sakaala, embodied. In his formlessness, he is worshipped as the linga. Long ago, in the first kalpa, Siva revealed his nishkaala form as a linga and since then is he worshipped so as the eternal Brahman. Listen.

Once, blue Vishnu, thousand-headed, thousand-armed, with his sankha, chakra and gada, lay asleep with Mahalakshmi on Anantasesha upon the naara, the primordial sea. The universe lay dissolved. As he slept, a lotus with an endless golden stalk and a blue corolla thrust itself out from his navel. Brahma, grandsire of the worlds, was born within this umbilical lotus, from Vishnu's golden womb. Brahma roamed that lotus for a hundred years but could not climb out of it. He began to climb down the infinite stalk, but he did not reach the place from where the flower grew. Then a disembodied voice said to him, "Tapasya is your way."

Brahma sat in meditation inside the lotus for twelve of his interminable years; one day, he found himself at his father Mahavishnu's side. Narayana lay asleep but he shone like kaala as he breathed, like chasmal Time. Striking the sleeping Blue God with his hand, Brahma said, "Who are you? You lie there haughtily even when you see me. Don't you know who I am?"

Vishnu was furious. However, controlling himself, he said calmly, "Welcome, my son. Tell me where you have come from and why you are so agitated. Sit here and tell me," said Vishnu, patting his serpent bed.

"I have come as swiftly as time! I am the Creator. How dare you call me 'my son' as a guru does his sishya? I am the Pitama, yours as well. I create, protect and destroy the universe."

Vishnu replied languidly, "You, my son, were born from me. Brahma, I am your father. The lotus in which you were born sprouted from my navel. But no matter, my own maaya deludes you."

At which, Brahma struck him again and a terrific fight erupted. They first fought like common men, with fists and rough punches. Then Vishnu mounted his eagle and Brahma his white swan and they fought with astras, cosmic weapons. The devas gathered in the sky in their silvery chariots to watch the battle. Vishnu hurled the Maheswarastra at Brahma, who unleashed the unfathomable Paasupatastra. These missiles spumed into the sky and, blazing like ten thousand suns, locked on high.

As the devas watched in horror, flames from the astras began to consume the three realms. Suddenly, between the two maddened Gods, a column sprang up through the ground: a column from nowhere, without top or base, a column of light and fire into which the apocalyptic astras were absorbed like two sparks. It was a linga! With thousands of garlands of flames, flames like galaxies spewing in every direction: an incomparable, incomprehensible linga. Awe-struck, Vishnu and Brahma fell quiet.

Brahma breathed, "What is it?"

Mahavishnu whispered, "It is beyond me. You find its head, while I seek its root."

Turning into a golden boar, he dived down through the ground of that first battlefield to seek the root of the mysterious linga of fire. Brahma became a swan and flew up at the speed of time, quicker than light, to seek the top of that manifestation. For longer than we can conceive, the boar dived and the swan flashed up; but, above or below, there was no end to the blazing phallus. Exhausted and frightened, Vishnu came back to the battlefield. Brahma flew on up.

When Siva saw them distraught in their arrogance, he laughed and dislodged, the ketaki flowers on his head fell down that infinite column. Down wafted those flowers, turning about one another, falling countless divine years, like a blessing, with neither fragrance nor brightness dimmed. They fell over Brahma, the flashing feathered ascender, in petal rain.

Perplexed, Brahma the swan said, "Lord of flowers, from whose head do you fall down this column? Why do you fall, good flowers?"

The flowers said, "Friend, we have been falling forever and we do not remember where we began. How will you find the column's pinnacle?"

Tired and annoyed as he was, Brahma had a thought. He bowed to the ketakis and said humbly, "Friends, a small favor for me: tell Vishnu I saw the top of the linga and that you bear witness to it." In dire straits, falsehood is recommended by even the oldest lore.

They found Mahavishnu in distress and Brahma smiled. Like a eunuch confessing his inability, Vishnu said ruefully, "I could not find the root of the linga."

Brahma replied smugly, "I found the column's head. These ketakis are my witness."

Hari bowed to Brahma; he worshipped him with all the sixteen homages. When he lay in the dust to worship Brahma's feet, a tremendous **AUM** resounded in that place, a thunderclap that would shatter the universe. Siva stepped out of the linga, taller than the phallus of fire, a wild, matt-haired Yogin bright as a billion suns. He stood before the terrified Gods, with bow and trident, wearing tiger-skin, a shining serpent the sacred thread around his body. He seemed to swallow the heavens with his million mouths, the **AUM** still dying in his blue throat like the battery of thunder that heralds the final deluge in which the stars drown. From that Vision's brow, from his third eye, sprang the dreadful Bhairava.

Bhairava knelt at Siva's feet, "Command me, almighty Lord!"

Siva said, "Here is Brahma, the first God of creation. Worship him with your sword."

With a roar, Bhairava seized the tuft on Brahma's fifth head, the one that lied to Vishnu and raised his curved blade. Brahma howled; he sweated, he trembled and fell whimpering at Bhairava's feet. Bhairava's arm was drawn back to take off the lying head. Then Vishnu knelt at Siva's feet. "Lord! You gave him five heads. Pardon him in your infinite mercy, this is his first offence."

Siva blessed Vishnu, "Hari, you were truthful though you also wanted to be the Lord of all things. From now, you will have as much worship as I do. But this liar shall not be worshipped any more, or have a temple of his own in the world."

Bhairava released Brahma and the chastened God prostrated before Siva, "Lord, I am humbled. Now bless me."

Siva said musingly, "The universe is ruined without the fear of a king. Rule the universe from now, Brahma and be the lord of sacrifices."

That day, Brahma and Vishnu first worshipped Siva. Ever after, the day of the Ardra nakshatra in the month of Margasirsa is when Mahadeva is worshipped, as both linga and murti. The bhakta who fasts day and night on holy Sivaratri, who worships the Lord and *deceives no one*, he shall have the blessings of a year of ordinary worship. Siva made the blazing linga, without root or tip, diminutive and quiescent. He installed it upon a yoni pedestal, which is Uma!'

Said Vyasa,"

Says the Suta Romaharshana.

Never again did Siva wear the ketaki on his head.

THREE

Gunanidhi

Wealth accrues from virtue and from wealth, enjoyment. Vairagya, detachment, is enjoyment's fruit. I bow to Sambhu, father of the universe, Sivaa its mother and Ganadhisa their son, before I recount this.

*

Once in a certain kalpa, Saunaka, eldest among the rishis of the Naimisa vana, says to Suta Romaharshana, "Maheswara is Aguna; he has no attributes. Sinless Suta, tell us how he became Saguna; tell about Siva and Sati, your Purana is nectar to us."

Suta says,

"My master Vyasa said to me,

'In the city of Kampilya, there was a dikshita, a priest, called Yajnadatta. He was a Vedanta scholar, famous and respected by the king. He invested his son Gunanidhi, a handsome boy bright like the moon, with the sacred thread and taught him the eight lores. However, the boy had a secret vice: he was a gambler.

His vice corroded him and soon Gunanidhi despised the sandhya vandana and even blasphemed against the Vedas. He shunned all things religious and brahmanical and godless heretics were his nearest friends. He took money from his indulgent mother and spent his time gambling. The mother was afraid she would break her husband's heart if she told him the truth about their only child. Yajnadatta was a busy man. When he came home tired and asked after his son, who always avoided him, his wife would say, "He was studying all day and I had to coax him to go out for a stroll with his friends. He is too conscientious."

In her gentle way, she often told her son, "If your father ever learns about your gambling he will beat you within an inch of your life and me too. I beg you, mend your ways."

The boy did not mend. His father performed his kesa karma when he was sixteen and got him married. Gunanidhi still did not reform. Now he

stole from his parents to pay his gambling debts. Once he stole a ring set with diamonds from his father to pay his losses to a professional gambler. The dikshita saw the ring on the gambler's finger, stopped the fellow in the street and demanded, "Where did you get that ring?"

At first, the man would not answer him; but when Yajnadatta called him a thief, the gambler retorted, "Your son is the thief. He is the worst gambler in this town, but he must play every day and lose."

Yajnadatta reeled. He bowed his head and went home. He asked his wife, "Where is the ring you took from my finger when you massaged me before my bath yesterday?"

Used to covering for Gunanidhi, she said from inside the house, "I am in the puja room. We had unexpected guests yesterday, remember? I can't think where I put your ring. But I will find it, as I do everything else."

"Like you did the golden vase with emeralds? The ivory trinket casket? The bell-metal jar? The silver statuette? Woman, whenever I asked after my son you said 'He just went out for a stroll after studying all day.' No, it is futile being angry with you. I will not eat until I marry another wife."

The same evening, Yajnadatta married another dikshita's daughter. Gunanidhi heard this and fled the town. He wandered long and far. Pangs of hunger tormented him. As the sun set, the young wastrel sat wearily at the foot of a spreading tree. Though he did not know it, it was Sivaratri that day.

At dusk, a party of bhaktas came to the temple that stood near Gunanidhi's tree. They came laden with sweets to offer the stone linga within. Gunanidhi crouched behind the tree waiting for the worship to be over and the devotees to leave, so he could creep inside and steal their offerings to appease his ravening hunger. As he sat dozing now and again, the bhaktas inside sang Siva's thousand names; they worshipped him with ecstatic dances. It was past midnight when they finished their devotions; even then, they did not leave. To Gunanidhi's chagrin, they lay down to sleep on the wide stone steps.

Gunanidhi waited. When he saw they were all asleep, he crept out from behind his tree and stole into the temple. All was still in there and the lamp burned low, throwing flickering shadows on to stone walls. Gunanidhi could not see the food he wanted to steal. Cursing softly, he tore

a strip from his loincloth and added it to the wick in the lamp. At once, the inside of that shrine was brightly lit up. Grabbing the offerings left by the worshippers, he came out.

But Gunanidhi's luck had run out and he stepped squarely on one of the sleepers. The man woke with a cry and caught the thief in the night by his ankle. The others awoke. Incensed when they saw what he had stolen, those bhaktas beat Gunanidhi to death. Not a morsel of the offerings for Siva passed the thief's lips.

When he died, Yama's awful soldiers arrived. They bound Gunanidhi hand and foot to take him to the dark city of the Lord of Death. In a flash of light, a knot of Sivaganas appeared there as well: trident-wielding, brilliant, bell tinkling amulets on their arms, their hair wild jata.

"Yamadutas," said the Sivaganas, "leave this righteous brahmana, his sins have been made ashes."

The Yamadutas said, "Apart from all his sins against his parents and dharma, look what he did this holy night: he desecrated the offerings for Siva! If this wretch has any shred of virtue to his name, let us hear of it."

The Sivaganas said, "The Lord says that before he died he heard the Kotirudra sung. Moreover, he fasted all this Sivaratri day. Most of all, like the truest bhakta, as if his soul commanded and the food was a pretext, on this sacred night Gunanidhi made the dim lamp burn brightly; then no shadow fell on the linga anymore. Yamadutas, ancient, inscrutable and of many lives unknown are the reasons of Siva."

Yama's horde had to give way. The Sivaganas took Gunanidhi to Sivaloka where, by the Lord's grace, he shone like the purest of the pure.

Gunanidhi was reborn as Dama, the son of Arindama, king of Kalinga. In his youth, his father died and Dama ascended the throne. He was the greatest Sivabhakta on earth of his time. The only form of worship in his kingdom was the lighting of lamps. Death was the punishment for a dimly lit temple and Kalinga was always aglow with bright lamps for Siva.

When he saw how effectual the lamps were, Dama went to Kasi, now to illumine his mind. He planted a linga before him and worshipped it with an awesome tapasya. Like a rising sun, Siva appeared before Dama, with Parvati beside him. Dazzled by the Lord, Dama shut his eyes.

Siva said, "Dama, choose any boon."

Dama said, "Give my eyes the power to be able to look at you without blinking, for no boon is greater."

Smiling, Siva touched Dama's head with his palm. Dama opened his eyes and saw Uma first. He squinted at her wickedly, his face twisting in a vicious snarl from Gunanidhi's worst days.

"Who is this beautiful woman," he rasped, "so near my Lord? What tapasya did she perform more perfect than mine? How lucky she is. How beautiful she is. Devi, you make my penance shine!"

He squinted and squinted, apparently in grotesque envy. He circled round her, mumbling the same words, sometimes aloud, sometimes under his breath. His left eye burst in his face. He squinted on with the right, "Devi, you make my tapasya shine!"

The annoyed Parvati said to Siva, "Who is this muni that squints enviously at me and mutters 'You make my tapasya shine!'"

Siva laughed. "He is your son, Uma! It's just his way. He is not envious or angry, only praising you as he knows how."

Smiling, he blessed Dama again, "You shall be the master of the mountain city Alaka, lord of yakshas and guhyakas, king of the asvamukha kinnaras. You shall be the guardian of the nine treasures. Gunanidhi, this is your mother Uma; take her blessing."

Gunanidhi lay at Parvati's feet. Seeing now that he was only devoted, she raised him up and blessed him. "May Siva's boons to you bear rich fruit! Since your left eye burst, we will call you Ekapinga; and Kubera of the twisted body since you stared at me. You will be devoted to Siva forever and he will come to stay near you: the Lord himself will be your friend."

By Uma's blessing to Kubera, master of treasures, Siva incarnated himself as Rudra on the solitary mountain of the earth. He came to Kailasa to be Gunanidhi's neighbour; white Kailasa and the secret city of Alaka, where Kubera rules, are next to each other.

He who reads or hears this story attentively,' said Vyasa, 'will enjoy every worldly pleasure and have moksha hereafter.'"

Says the gifted Suta in the Naimisa vana.

FOUR

Sandhya

AUM. Just as Siva is always locked with Parvati, the linga clings to its yoni, forever.

Mahavishnu said to Viswakarma, the divine craftsman, "Create auspicious Sivalingas and give them to all the devas!"

So Indra had a linga of ruby, Kubera had one of gold; Dharma had one of bronze, Varuna one of lapis lazuli. Vishnu was given a linga of sapphire, Brahma had a golden one; the Vasus had silver lingas, the Asvins earthen and brazen ones. Mahalakshmi had a crystal linga, the Adityas twelve copper ones; Soma the Moon took a linga of pearl, Agni one of diamond, Maaya had one of fragrant sandalwood and Anantasesha got one of coral. The Goddesses had lingas of butter, the yogins of ash; Saraswati worshipped a linga of ratna and Bana one of mercury.

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In the solemn clearing at the heart of the sacred forest, the Suta says to Saunaka's sages,

"Vyasa said to me,

'Once Narada asked Brahma, "God with the lotus face, Father, I am never sated hearing the lore of Siva from you. Tell me more about Rudra, tell me about him and Sati."

Brahma said, "Siva himself told this to Vishnu once and it was Narayana that told it to me. Listen closely, hearing this ancient tale fulfils all desires.

Originally, when Siva was separate from Shakti, he was pure consciousness. He was without qualities, without form, beyond being and unbeing. When he was united with Shakti, he had attributes, O Brahmana. He had a form and divine features; he was with Uma forever.

Vishnu was born from his left side and I, Brahma, from his right. Rudra was born from his heart. I was the Creator, Vishnu was the Sustainer and Rudra was the Destroyer.

It was after worshipping Sadasiva that I, Pitama of the worlds, began creation. I created the devas of light, the asuras of darkness, human beings who are of both light and dark and their guardians the prajapatis, Daksha and the rest. I was delighted, Narada, I thought I was the loftiest God.

When I had created Marichi, Atri, Pulaha, Pulastya, Angiras, Kratu, Vasishtha, you Narada, Daksha and Bhrigu, my noble sons, a woman was born from my mind. She was the first woman, stunning Sandhya. Not in the human world or in the devas' realms, not in the under worlds or any of the three times is there a woman so perfect. When I saw her, my heart was seized by unthinkable thoughts and my sons as well. When she appeared, we rose to our feet, overcome.

For the first time, desire's unfamiliar pang tormented our minds. We saw another being born from me in the sky and oh he was beautiful! His skin was golden, his nose was perfect, blue wavelets were his hair. His eyebrows were heavy; his face shone like the moon, his chest was as broad as a door. He was as great as Indra's Airavata and he wore a diaphanous blue robe. His hands, eyes, face and legs were ruddy, his waist was slender and his teeth were like pearls. He had the heady scent of the ichor of an elephant in rut; his eyes were two petals of a blooming lotus and his neck was like Vishnu's sankha. He rode the Makara fish, his breath was a fragrant breeze; he carried a sugarcane bow and a quiver with five flowery arrows. His gaze roved over us and he smiled, dazzling.

Bowing to me with that haughty smile on his lips, he said, "Brahma, what honourable karma do you have for me? What shall I be called and who will be my wife?"

I steadied myself before speaking to that enchanter; I was already his victim. I said, "No one in the three worlds will turn aside your flower arrows, not men, not the devas; not Vishnu, Siva or I will defy your sweet dictates. Be the God of love and your karma to increase creation. As for your names, let my sons, the Brahmarishis, name you and say who will be your wife."

I sweated with shame at the feelings he evoked in me. You rishis said, "At your very birth, you seduced our hearts. We will call you Manmatha: roiler of minds. Since you can assume any form you like, you shall be Kama. You ensnare with delight, so you will be Madana; because you are so haughty you shall be Darpaka and Daksha's daughter will be your wife."

No sooner had they spoken than Kama, finest of archers, vanished from our sight. Invisible now, he strung his bow and drew an arrow from his quiver. Lithely, he assumed the posture of the bowman: alidha. He bent his bow in a flowery circle. Mad breezes billowed there and he pierced us all in a moment with his soft, ineluctable shafts. Oh, his enchantment seized our souls and now we stared with naked lust at Sandhya, their sister, my daughter. For the first time in creation, there was such desire.

Kama's subtle sorcery pierced her, too. She rippled with temptation, with sidelong, seductive glances at us; the forty-nine animal instincts were born hotly from my dharmic body. Sandhya walked around me, her father, in pradakshina. I hated to stare at her as I did in front of my sons. I knew the seething lust was plain in my eyes. As she walked around me, a face appeared from my neck to my right, pale cheeks quivering, another behind me, another at my left, all to gaze helplessly at her. Blushing, she flew into the air to avoid my burning regard. At once, a fifth head grew above me, which I hid in my jata.

I could not contain myself any longer. I said to my sons, "You must assume the task of creation with Kama's help, for all my punya is about to be lost."

They went obediently from there, rapt in their own fantasies of her; in rut, they poured forth all kinds of worlds and beings. I lifted up my beautiful daughter, prostrate before me now and in tears. For the first time in creation, I, Brahma, coupled recklessly with her within the pavilion of the golden lotus.

One son of mine was not smitten, or at least not entirely: Dharma, the protector of virtue. He saw his father's lust and his brothers'; but he himself felt more sorrow than desire. In fear, he invoked Siva.

Dharma prayed, "Siva free from the three gunas, O Turiya, the fourth Being. You who are beyond Prakriti, save me from this sin."

Siva materialised there and saw me with Sandhya. He began to laugh softly. Trembling with both shame and arousal, I extricated myself from my daughter's arms. He arched a fine brow and said, "With your daughter, Brahma?"

I, grandsire of worlds, was speechless. Still, my body and my soul burned for her: for the life of me, I would only join with her again at once, even while Siva gazed at us. I shook with lust and my seed sprang from me

in an uncontrollable ejaculation. The ancestors called the Bhṛisadas were born, sixty-four thousand of them from my retas.

Dakṣha and the others had returned in secret, to watch my primal fornication. Seeing Siva there in glory, they came shamefaced from hiding. Now they could not contain themselves. From Dakṣha's seed, spilt helpless on to the ground, Rati was born naked. Her body was as golden as Kamadeva's. Her hips were flaring and perfect and we saw the place between her thighs embellished with dark, piquant hair. Bewitched in his turn, the hunter snared, Kama came crooning to her. He took her hand and began to kiss her a thousand times.

Marichi and some other sons of mine struggled resolutely and held their virtue back with yoga. Kratu, Vasishṭha, Pulastya and Angiras were overcome by what they had seen and ejaculated onto holy ground. The manes called the Kavyahas, who are the receivers of oblations, sprang up from their seed.

Thus, Sandhya became the mother of the pitrs, the manes. His soft, mocking laughter still ringing in our minds, Siva vanished. My desire faded as suddenly as it had gripped me; in a rage, I cursed Kama, "One day, you will shoot your arrows at Siva himself and he will consume you with fire from his eye! Then your arrogance will perish and you with it."

He grew stiff with fear and he whimpered, "Father, why do you curse me so savagely? You yourself said 'Vishnu, Siva, I, all of us shall be targets for your arrows'. I only did what you ordained. Is it just that you curse me for it?"

I said to him, "You made me commit incest with my daughter! Yet, what you say is true. So when Siva takes a wife to him forever, he will restore your body, which he shall first make ashes."

Shame searing my heart, I staggered from that place to perform a tapasya such as the stars had not seen, to expiate my original sin," said Brahma wistfully, reminiscing of the oldest, grandest days, the first of creation.

Narada scratched his head thoughtfully for a moment. Then he asked, "And what became of Rati? I do not remember clearly, Father, it was so long ago."

Brahma said,

"Dakṣha said, 'Kama, this daughter of mine already loves you. Take her to be your wife, she has been born just for you.'

Rati could charm the world. Her eyebrow was more arched than Kama's sugarcane bow. Her glances at him were more deadly than his petal arrows. When Kama went near, her breath made him forget the fragrance of the first malaya breeze. He saw her face was a full moon. Her breasts were lotus buds, their black nipples the bees hovering over the golden flowers. She wore a slim necklace with stones that were the eyelets of a peacock's tail; his gaze dwelt there, his eyes turning red as plums. Her crimson hands had nails like kimsuka flowers, her arms and wrists were as fine as lotus stalks. Her hair was blue like his; her navel was a deep eddy. When he looked below to where the dark soft locks nestled like river moss, Kama was lost.

Kama took his ecstatic delusion Rati to himself as the yogin does his gyana. My curse was forgotten and Daksha, the father-in-law, was the most pleased. Kama and Rati were like a sunset cloud shot with brilliant lightning, even like Lakshmi and Hari!"

Said Brahma to Narada, who adored these tales of old and never tired of them though he had heard them many times from that perfect raconteur.'

Said Vedavyasa to me," says Suta to Saunaka's rishis in the Naimisa vana.

FIVE

Brahma plans revenge

The linga is of two kinds, the outward and the inner; the outer is sthula, gross and the inner sukshma, subtle. The subtle linga in the hearts of yogins is the purest □ blissful, auspicious, immanent and undying!

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Pressed by the eager rishis of the Naimisa, Suta Romaharshana tells them,

"Narada asked Brahma Pitama, 'What happened after Kama married Rati?'

His great eyes glowing in remembrance, Brahma said, 'I decided I must take revenge on Siva. His laughter echoed in my mind, searing me. I thought, "He scoffed at me only because he is such a Yogi. If he were to fall in love himself, take a wife, he would laugh out of the other side of his face."

All my tapasya failed to assuage the fire in my heart. I came back to my children. I felt hopeful when I saw the beautiful Kama and Rati. I said to Kama, "Remember, Manmatha, only when Siva falls in love will you have redemption from my curse. You must follow him everywhere and cast your enchantment over the Ascetic."

He replied, "My arrows are my lesser weapons. To delude Siva we must first have a woman with whom he will fall in love."

When Daksha and I considered this, we wondered which woman could capture that passionless heart. Dejected, I sighed.

Spring was born from that sigh and I scarcely knew how. He came decked in a riot of flowers and scents. His complexion was a red lotus', he had long black ringlets of hair and his face was like a full moon at dusk. He was dark, nearly maroon, sensuously fine-featured. The trees burst into bloom, koyals sang and clear lakes were suddenly heavy with lotuses. I felt a new surge of hope, surely this magical being could make my endeavour succeed! A malaya breeze blew coolly around us and I said to

Kama, "This one will be the inducer to permanent love, marriage. I name him Vasantha. Let him be your companion and help you beguile Siva."

With a colourful and romantic train, they went off to Kailasa, where Siva lived, bewitching every creature on their way into abandon. The earth bloomed in a spring of love. Yet, though they followed him everywhere, from Kailasa to Meru to Naagakesara, bringing divine desire with them, Siva was not moved from his dhyana: not even to anger. Men succumbed to the charms of Kama and his friends; rishis of grave celibacy gave in to temptation. Devas, asuras, kinnaras, yakshas and gandharvas, all the immortal mountain folk were in mad, rutting love. But not Siva, or his ganas.

Kama came back to me vanquished. "Brahma, this One is fearful to even look at! Who can seduce him? When he decides to emerge from samadhi who will dare stand before his blazing eyes? I cannot beguile Siva. My arrows fell around him like garlands of ash; not one pierced the armour of his dhyana."

I despaired, Narada; but I knew what I must do. Swallowing my pride, I went to Vishnu, the sleeper on the waters of infinity, which are all the mandalas. Wearing refulgent yellow, smiling at me, not without mockery, blue Narayana said, "Brahma of the fathomless intellect, why have you thought of me today, Father of the worlds? What misery has overtaken you?"

I said, choking, "Your power is the highest; the universe is in its thrall, Kesava. By your maaya, I embarked upon my destiny!"

I told him about Sandhya and Kama; and of Siva's laughter, which lay like a molten serpent in my memory. I told him about my plan to seduce Siva into love and of how Kama, Rati, mistress of the sixty-four fine arts of desire and Vasantha, together, had failed to move him. Vishnu's smile grew wider and he said indulgently, "Brahma, whom do you think you are trying to seduce? This is Siva, the Un-born. There is only one Goddess in creation that can help you. If Durga takes a body of flesh and blood, then perhaps Rudra will take a wife."

Leaning closer, he whispered, "Tell Daksha to go to the Kshirasagara, the sea of milk and perform a tapasya to the Devi. All will be granted."

Hope sprang alive again in my heart: here was the perfect solution. Had Kama not said his arrows were only his lesser weapons and we must

first have the woman to captivate the Yogin? I bowed to Mahavishnu and left Vaikunta.

I began an unequalled worship of Durga, Devi of vidya and avidya, knowledge and ignorance, mother of the three great Gods: Durga, grossest of the gross, who is yet so subtle she has no form. She appeared in coruscating light before me, indescribable Chandika! Her black skin shone like kohl; she was eight-armed and blessed me with one of her hands. She rode a lion; pearls glowed in her dishevelled hair. She was wildest of the wild, gentlest of the gentle; the crescent moon was upon her brow, she had three eyes. Muni, I bent in two to worship her, who was as bright as ten suns. I lay on my face at her feet.

"I bow to you who came as Lakshmi, the garland around Vishnu's throat! You hold the earth within yourself. You are kutasta, avyakta and ananta; you are eternal kaala in whom the worlds abide. You are the cause of the three gunas and are beyond them; you create, protect and devour the universe. Obeisance, O great female seed of all things, who are knowledge and knower. I bow to you, Mother!"

Kaali said benevolently, "Brahma, what you want must be difficult to have that you worshipped me with such a penance. Tell me what it is. I will give you anything."

I looked into her shining face and said as bravely as I could, "Siva the Yogin lives upon Kailasa as Rudra. The Lord of goblins lives alone and ascetic, O Shakti. Not Vishnu or I, not Lakshmi or Kama, no one but you can seduce him to love. Be born as a woman, Devi and become his wife."

The Goddess seemed startled. She said mischievously, "Oh, this is extraordinary! He is the creator of the universe, the reciter of the Veda, a God of divine gyana: and this is what he asks. Yet, having given my word, I must grant you any boon you want."

I said to Mahakaali, "Mother, my son Daksha sits in tapasya in your name on the shores of the Kshirasagara. I beg you, be born as his daughter to fascinate Rudra."

The Mother said, "So be it" and vanished.

Daksha's tapasya lasted three thousand years; imbibing only air, he worshipped her. At the end of that time, she manifested before him: Kaalika on her lion: dark, beautiful and eight-armed, holding a blue lotus and a curved sword.

Daksha said, "Primordial Durga, wielder of illusion over the universe, bless me!"

She smiled at him, "Daksha, I am pleased with your worship. Ask me for any boon you want."

"Be born as my daughter, Devi and become Rudra's wife."

The Goddess shone like the sun before Daksha. She was as tall as the sky on her ferocious mount and he trembled before her. She raised a crimson hand in benediction, "So be it, Prajapati."

A shadow flitted across her face for an instant, as if a pang of darkness touched her cosmic mind. Then she was gone. Daksha returned to the mandala that was his asrama and began his task of creation. He created myriad beings from his mind; but when he saw they did not grow, he came distraught to me.

"Father, these children of my mind are inert."

I said to my son, "Virana, lord of the earthly tribes, has a daughter called Virini. Take her for your wife and people the world by copulation."

Daksha begot the five thousand Haryasvas on his wife Virini. These had separate bodies but scarcely separate identities or lives: they were all so alike. Daksha told them to go west and perform tapasya, so the children of creation could emerge from their inertness and flourish. The Haryasvas came to the holy lake called the Narayana, where the Sindhu meets the ocean. As soon as they touched those sacred waters, they were cleansed of the impurity with which they were born. Fettered by their father's command, they began a tapasya to enliven the children of nature.

But, Narada, intuiting Vishnu's subtle scheme behind the Haryasvas' tapasya, you came to your brother's sons and said, "Nephews, how can you even think of becoming creators without first seeing the ends of the universe?"

What you said stirred them! They worshipped you and then set off on a quest from which they never returned, the quest to find the ends of the universe. Daksha mourned his sons; often he muttered, "A multitude of sons brings only disaster."

Time healed him; and again, upon his wife Virini, called Asikni, daughter of Panchajana, lord of the five original tribes of the earth, with great coition Daksha Prajapati begot another thousand sons to fructify creation, sons named Sabalasvas. They, too, came to the sacred lake Narayana and were purified. They also began a fervent tapasya to become

fruitful creators. Again, Narada, you came to them and subverted their minds by reminding them of the unknown ends of the universe. They were also seduced; and went off on the eternal journey, never to return.

Daksha learnt who was responsible for what happened to his sons and fate brought you to him just then. Your brother cursed you, "Shameless corrupter of children's minds, be an eternal wanderer like my sons! Narada, I curse you to be homeless for what you have done. May your heart and your feet never have peace unless you are on the move."

You received the curse with a smile; indeed, what else could you do? Meanwhile, I grew impatient. I saw Daksha was not going about creation in a sensible manner or with any order: we were no nearer fulfilling my plan to seduce Siva. I cajoled him, I blessed him and now Daksha begot sixty daughters upon his wife. Ten of them he gave in marriage to Dharma, thirteen to Kashyapa and twenty-seven to Soma the Moon. He gave two daughters each to Bhrigu, Angiras and Krisava. The rest he gave to Tarkshya. The children born from those first marriages peopled the worlds.

Some say Sivaa was the eldest of Daksha's daughters and some that she was the youngest. Some say she was born in the middle and all three are true for different kalpas. When Virini shone forth during her pregnancy like the Devi herself, Daksha knew Kaali had kept her word to him. He was ecstatic; he performed the pumsavana rites that are usually done only for the birth of a son. The devas visited Daksha and Virini; the asuras came to pay homage.

In the tenth month of Virini's pregnancy, Sivaa suddenly appeared before her, scintillating. The quarters had grown profoundly tranquil; there was a fine shower of rain and flowers from the heavens. The devas had gathered in the sky with sublime music and dance. Yagna fires burned strong and serene that day. The moon, the stars and the planets were all perfectly auspicious.

Daksha joined his palms in homage to fabulous Kaali. He said, "Obeisance, Mother of all things. I bow to you who told Brahma to create the worlds, Vishnu to sustain them and Rudra to destroy them. You are the Mother of the Trimurti. O Kaali of vidya and avidya, of rajasika, sattvika and tamasika forms, Bhavani, Jaganmaya, O Durga, I worship you!"

"Daksha, your wish is granted," said she and she was an ordinary infant wailing at her mother's side: but oh, she was lovely, a blemishless baby. Seeing her unearthly face, Daksha and Asikni's joy was complete.

Vishnu and I went there to bless the holy child. We found her feeding hungrily at her mother's breast. How luminous she was, she the essence of the three worlds!' said Brahma, overcome at the memory,'

My Guru Vyasa said to me."

Suta also pauses in his narration to the rishis.

SIX

Siva and Sati

He had sat in tapasya for thousands of interminable, cosmic years; yet, his mind grew unsteady with compassion for the world. His eyes fluttered half open and tears fell from them as if at a vow broken. From those precious drops the first rudraksha plants sprouted.

Siva has said to the Goddess, the rudraksha is the holiest bead in this world. Wearing rudraksha, Siva's tears, destroys the most heinous sins.

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Suta says,

"My guru Vyasa said to me, 'Narada urged his father Brahma to continue with the Purana, after the birth of Sati.

Brahma resumed, "The goodness of that child, who was Parashakti incarnate, grew like the moon on its way to fullness. Even as a small girl, she drew pictures of Rudra, of uncanny likeness, though she had never seen him. Her songs of childhood were of Siva; the melodies and lyrics came to her, inspired and incomparable.

Almost before we knew it, she reached puberty. Do you remember Narada, you and I went to visit her in her father's house? How entirely exquisite she was. I can still see her in my mind, as if it was just this morning. She took no convincing, did she, of what we wanted of her? She knew she was born to be Siva's bride. Daksha had been delighted at the thought; he had always encouraged her to draw her pictures of Rudra, to sing of him. Now, when he saw her a young woman, perfect-faced, perfect-bodied, he thought, 'How will I give her to anyone, even Siva?'

Perhaps, that was the germ of his sin; seeing Sati, who could have blamed him? Though what he did later was unforgivable.

You and I said to her, 'Sati, with tapasya you can make him yours, who has never taken a woman.'

Sati worshipped Rudra in her home. In Asvina, she prayed to him with an unflickering mind, on the first, sixth and eleventh days of the dark half of the Margasirsa moon. She was awake all night on the seventh day of the bright half of Pausa and worshipped him at dawn with cooked rice and krishara. On the riverbank, her clothes soaked through, she worshipped him on the purnima night in Magha. On the amavasya day of the dark half of Phalguna, she stayed up all night again and on the chaturdasi day of Chaitra, offering palasa and damana flowers. She fasted a month in Jyeshtha, in Ashada she invoked him with brihati flowers, wearing only a black cloth. In Sravana, she prayed to him with sacred threads. She drank no water, save on the fourteenth day in Bhadra. Every day and soon every moment, she spent in devotion to him. Nothing else made her happy and he was established in her passionate heart.

After these rituals, Sati began her bhakti in earnest: she thought of nothing but him. So single-minded was her dhyana, the devas of light came to watch her; Hari and I came to watch her. We marvelled at her immaculate tapasya! Then we went to austere, magnificent Kailasa, Vishnu with Lakshmi, I with Saraswati and all the devas in entourage. We said to him, "Obeisance Mahesa, O Purusha beyond Prakriti! Obeisance, Parabrahman: your realm unknown to the sages and gods. Obeisance, three-eyed, always radiant, pervasive Lord. Obeisance, Lord of yogins, all merciful Siva!"

Siva gave us an ambiguous look, Muni and my heart gave a lurch. Surely, he divined our intention as clearly as a father does his child's. He said in his slow, deep way, "Vishnu, Brahma, O Devas, I am delighted by your stotra. Tell me, what brings you to Kailasa?"

Always the quickest of us, Vishnu inclined his head at me. So of course, in Siva's awesome presence, I became our spokesman. "Ocean of mercy," I began, avoiding his gaze for I was afraid, "we have come to petition you. O Vrishabhadhvaja, though Vishnu, you and I are One in truth, we are three and separate in the universe of forms. Vishnu has Lakshmi for his wife and I, Saraswati. We beg you to also marry: if not for your own pleasure, at least for the sake of creation," said I, trembling.

He was not a bit put out. "Vishnu and Brahma, the sight of you both quickens my joy, O masters of worlds! But of what use is a wife to me? I have bliss in my yoga: to me marriage can only be bondage. Yet, since you have come to petition me, how can I refuse?"

He was so sure of himself. "But tell me who I can marry, Brahma. Which woman do you know who can bear my golden seed in her body?" He paused, then said thoughtfully, "She must be a yogini when I am a yogin, an ardent wife when I am a grihasta. When I am absorbed in my Atman, she will be damned if she distracts me.

And a final condition, O best of Gods: *if she ever doubts me for even a moment, I will abandon her.* Find me such a wife and, if for nothing else, to please you both I will marry her.'

He laughed. He was certain we could never find or even create the woman he described. By our secrecy and her maaya, he did not yet know about the Devi's incarnation. It was true, which other woman could bear his terrific seed within her womb. His blazing, golden hiranyaretas!

I smiled and Mahavishnu also. Now he had committed himself, I said to Siva, "We know the woman for you."

He arched a long brow, but I met his gaze levelly; at that moment, he knew of the Devi's birth. There was not a flicker from Rudra, no ripple on the sea of calm that was his face. Encouraged, I went on eagerly, if now a little ashamed of my petty scheming against this noblest God. I did not realise all this was his doing, beginning with Sandhya, my daughter in the lotus. Siva saw deeper and farther in time than I ever did.

"She is Daksha's child, my grand-daughter. She is called Sati and she is Durga born into the world just for you," I said triumphantly. "She already worships you with a fierce tapasya. Take her for your wife, Siva, let the three worlds rejoice."

Vishnu put in, "Do so, my Lord. The universe will be ennobled when you marry Sati."

Siva said quietly, "If my conditions are met, so be it."

Then he looked at me piercingly for a moment, deep into my eyes, my soul, where I hardly knew myself but felt him gaze. I broke into a fine sweat as an ominous foreboding stirred within me, a dark thing. Even in that moment of victory, I remembered that the reason why this had come about was hardly pure. I thrust the thought away as inauspicious and Siva murmured, "All will be well at last."

Vishnu, the others and I came away happy.

During the month of Asvina, Sati observed her fast as usual on the eighth day of the bright half. The next night, Siva appeared before her. He came in light. He was supremely handsome, fair, five-faced, three-eyed;

the crescent moon was in his topknot, his neck was blue where he had once quaffed poison. He carried the trisula and wore an emerald serpent as an amulet of protection. His body shone with an ascetic's sacred dust: a cosmos of infinitesimal stars. The Ganga sparkled in his jata; he was lustrous as a hundred Kamas. His staggering beauty pierced Sati through; he had assumed a most ravishing form for this devotee. She bent her head shyly and knelt at his feet.

Gently and forever, he touched her head with his palm. His grace entered her like fire of galaxies. Siva said tenderly, "Dakshayani, I am pleased with your tapasya. Ask me for anything you want."

He wanted, Narada, to hear her speak. Having seen her face and her form, he already imagined her voice. She was so overcome, she was speechless; she stared mutely at the ground.

"Choose your vara, girl," he urged her again.

She managed to whisper, "As you are pleased to give me: either the boon I want or the husband I desire."

He laughed, delighted now at what he had committed him to, that Sati stood blushing and so lovely before him. He said, "You be my wife."

She raised her great eyes up to his and smiled into his heart like the beginning of a new creation. They stood for a long while, locked in that gaze, lost in sringara. He shone like the finest crystal and she like glossy kohl. She was as lambent as the moon on a dark night, or the Chitra nakshatra. She lowered her eyes: if she stared any longer, she would never tear herself away.

She joined her palms to him, "Siva, take me to be your wife in my father's house."

In a daze, Siva replied, "So be it."

Trembling with joy, Sati went home to her mother. Siva went back to his asrama and tried to return to his dhyana; but his life had changed. He tried to invoke the Sabdabrahman, the Pranava, **AUM**, in his heart, but Sati's voice whispered there instead. He saw her watching him with such love he thought she had come to his ice cave and his eyes flew open. Shaking his head when he saw she was not there, he summoned me with a thought.

With Saraswati, I went to him, pining on his mountain. He was like any other man in love. He did his best to hide his feelings. They shone through his every artifice like the sun through morning mist. Awkward as I

had never seen him, he said, "I have been worshipped by Daksha's daughter Sati. She observed the sacred Nanda rites and, having given Hari and you my word, I was bound to honour her worship. She said to me, 'Be my vara, Siva,' and I replied, 'Sati, be my wife.'"

Was that entirely the truth he spoke, Narada? He who cursed me to be forever without worship in the world because I told one small lie. I did not care anymore: he was no longer calm and I was pleased. Did he remember how he had mocked me when he found me in Sandhya's arms; did he recall how cruelly he had laughed? He was the mockable one now, great Siva, the laughable one □ the Mahayogin lovestruck and in such a hurry to send me off to his prospective father-in-law, to finalise his wedding!

While I smiled to myself in satisfaction, he said, "Brahma, you must ask Daksha to give me his daughter."

He drew me aside, away from the others. Shedding every pretence of detachment, he said hoarsely, "As quickly as you can, Brahma, I cannot bear being apart from her!"

That was such a delicious moment. All the planning, the waiting, the penance, was worth that moment. Then, compassion for great Maheswara moved me: didn't I know how he felt? I said, "I will go to Daksha at once. He will offer you his daughter himself."

Meanwhile, Sati had come home to her parents. Seeing her, Virini knew what had happened. She clasped Sati to her and mother and daughter wept for excitement. To be fair to him, Daksha also was happy when he heard the news and he announced a celebration to mark the day.

He began to wonder how to take the next step. Siva had gone back to his mountain. Would he come again? What course was proper in the circumstances, which was expedient? Should he send a messenger to the Yogin? No. If Siva spurned an offer of Sati's hand, the humiliation would be unbearable. Who could believe the Ascetic's legendary disdain of women had vanished overnight? Yet, Rudra had promised Sati he would be her husband.

"Shall I worship Siva myself?" wondered Daksha Prajapati, his mind a whirl. Even as he longed for a mediator, I appeared before him, coming straight from Siva.

He was shrewd enough to guess this was no routine visit by a father to his son; also, the triumph on my face must have been plain. After

welcoming Saraswati and me with due homage and making us comfortable, as a son should, Daksha asked, "Pitama, is there any special reason why you are here?"

I laughed aloud, so exhilarated was I. I grasped his hand and cried, "Without being pierced by Kama's arrows, Siva is smitten with your Sati! Excited as any young lover, he no longer meditates on the Atman but upon your daughter's face. He imagines her coming to him and asks his ganas, 'Is she here?' When they answer 'No', he sits grave for a while, then asks again, 'Is she here?' Love has vanquished great Siva! I have just seen him and he worships Sati today exactly as she worshipped him."

Clapping my hands, I laughed again. I did not know that, sooner than I thought, I would pay for the unseemly merriment. Not quite sharing my elation, Daksha waited in silence. He knew I would tell him how to proceed.

When I controlled myself, I said, "I will tell Narada to bring Siva here. When he comes, offer Sati to him without delay."

Leaving Daksha bemused, I flew back to Siva waiting anxiously for me. "What happened, Brahma? Eldest of devas, did Daksha refuse to give her to me? You must convince him that she and I are meant to be together. You must tell him as his father to change his mind."

So he babbled for a while, without letting me get in a word. He was in such a state: wringing his hands and mine from time to time. Finally, raising my voice before him as I had never dared or had reason to before, I managed to gain his attention. "Daksha did not refuse what you asked."

"What do you mean?" he cried, not believing his fortune.

"What I say, my Lord. Daksha said, 'Now that he asks for her, my daughter shall go to him. Why else did she worship him? It is my wish, also, that she becomes his wife. Let him come to me at the time of an auspicious conjunction of the stars and I will give her to him.' So Daksha said to me, Siva," said I, hiding a smile.

He actually whimpered in delight, Narada! He beamed like a newborn star, the mighty Yogin and I scoffed at him silently; though I could not help rejoice with him, as well, so infectious was his joy. Inscrutable fate recorded my scorn.

Siva said, "With you and Narada and all your other sons, I will go to Daksha's house with my ganas. Summon the rishis, Pitama of the universe. The stars already spin into their houses of exaltation."

With a thought, I summoned my children, you among them, Narada. They arrived in glory: the manes Marichi, Atri, Pulaha, Pulastya, Kratu, Angiras, Vasishta and Bhrigu. Then, called by Siva's wish and most glorious of all, with their limitless army, came Mahavishnu and Mahalakshmi, flying on golden Garuda. It was the thirteenth day of Chaitra, the bright half of that month. The moon was in the Uttara Phalguni nakshatra. It was the Sun's day, when Siva and his train set out for Daksha's abode.

The devas celebrated on the way and, most of all, the Lord's ganas did. Siva rode on his bull, Nandiswara, at the head of a motley and brilliant wedding party like the world had never seen.

If you remember, Daksha received us with ceremony. He came out himself to escort Siva, Vishnu and me, the devas and rishis into his home. He worshipped us all and gave Siva pride of place to sit. Then he came and knelt before me.

"Father, perform the marriage rites as prescribed in the Veda."

From wounded pride, I had once begun what was culminating this day. Joyfully, I began to perform the sacred rituals. The stars and the planets were in exceptional harmony, as if they were sensitive to the love of Siva and Sati. Daksha gave his daughter to Mahadeva; but in our eagerness, we did not worship the heavenly ones, the planets and the constellations, as we should have. In his impatience, even Siva was happy to have the ceremonies over. Being the priest, I should have been more meticulous. Guilty for the secret scorn I had enjoyed at his expense, I wanted to please Siva now by hurrying through the solemn rites of marriage.

Almost at once misfortune struck me; but that was nothing compared with what followed. When I think of it now, it was all a trial and Siva came through it with the most dignity, though he was the most severely tried. I have also wondered how much Vishnu knew, but did not tell.

At that wedding, Narayana said, inscrutably, "Siva, look at the four of us! You are fair and Sati dark as twilight; I am blue and Lakshmi white. Auspicious One, Lord of all the living, promise me you will kill the man, whoever he is, that looks at your Sati with lust."

Siva agreed, "I shall!"

I performed all the kriyas prescribed in the grihyasutras. I asked the bride and groom to circle the sacred fire. As they walked round the pit where the fire crackled, fate punished me.

They circled slowly, for this is the ordained way. Siva walked in front, saying, "To thee they did carry Surya round with the bridal procession at first. May you return Agni to them and children."

I saw Sati's dark foot, bow-like arch, arrow-straight toes and curved nails, protruding past the hem of her garment; suddenly I was paralysed with lust. I stood there, the priest for the occasion, feeding the fire, chanting holy mantras, overcome. Helplessly, my eyes roved over her body. I kept my face turned down, but a shameless fever in my loins coupled lewdly with me beside the altar. I stood crooked and awkwardly, to hide my arisen manhood.

I had to see her face; but she walked behind Siva with her head bent in modesty. I threw damp twigs onto the fire. Clouds of black smoke spewed up and engulfed us. Coughing, Siva covered his face with his hands for a moment. In a trice, I lifted the uncomprehending Sati's veil and gazed at her with a moan. At that moment, a climax of ineffable power wracked me. I staggered back, holding my seed within me as best I could with dhyana. Four drops dripped from my penis and fell on the ground.

At first, if he saw me lift his bride's veil, Siva might have assumed I was helping her adjust it. Now he saw my guilty emission. He sprang forward with a roar and seized my throat. A trisula from nowhere blazed in his hand, raised to behead me.

"Wretch! On my wedding day, as we circled the holy fire."

I was too stunned to speak, it had all happened so swiftly. I only whimpered and prepared to die. Marichi, you and the others began to shout and quick-wittedly to hymn wrathful Siva. Fortunately, Daksha had the courage to run forward and seize the hand with the trisula.

Siva said, "Daksha, you heard what Vishnu asked and I granted: that if any man looked lustfully at Sati, I would kill him. I cannot break my oath to Vishnu. And look here!"

Before that august, divine congregation, he pointed out the moist place on the ground where my seed had fallen. How can I describe the terror and shame of that moment? Some gasped at my sin; others, especially the women, tittered savagely, clicking their tongues. Then, just in time, Vishnu was at Siva's side, restraining him.

"Siva, he is your bhakta, don't kill him. For my sake, do not kill him. If you do, who will carry on creation? Moreover, Lord, it was Brahma that prayed for Sati to be born as Daksha's daughter."

Terrible Rudra was adamant. Eyes blazing, he cried, "Don't stop me, Hari, I must kill this four-faced dog. I will assume the task of creation myself, or create another Creator!"

He raised the smoking trident again and I shut my eyes. I heard Vishnu say, so calmly, "Siva, one cannot kill oneself. We three are one and it is absurd to think of killing yourself."

The bridegroom demanded, "This wretch and I one? How Vishnu? He stands brazen out there, quite distinct from me."

"Brahma is not apart from you, nor you from him. I am not separate from you or you from me. Siva, you are the primeval Being, the supreme Brahman and everything is part of you," declared Mahavishnu in a clear voice, so the assembly of rishis and devas heard him. I felt Siva grow calm. His grip on my throat relaxed; he dropped me on the floor in a heap. Suddenly he smiled and his face radiated the sea-like calm of old. I sighed in relief and thanked Vishnu with all my heart: none but the Blue Saviour could have stopped Siva from killing me that day.

Terror vanished from there like magic. Siva stood kindly again, you would scarcely believe this was the same God of a moment ago. He gave me his hand to pick myself up from the floor. I fell on my face at his feet. I cried, "Paramasiva, no one but you would have spared my life after what I did. How can you ever forgive me?"

He smiled. "Brahma, touch your head with your hand."

The moment I did, I became the bull on which he rode. I bent my head. "Forgive me, forgive me! If I must die to atone, so be it."

Siva pronounced, "As this bull, you will do penance to seek my forgiveness. The world will know you as 'the head of Rudra'. Spilling seed is the way of humans, so you will also be born as a man and wander the earth. Wherever you go, people will ask, 'What is on Brahma's head?' You will reply, 'Siva'. Adulterers will be forgiven their sin if they hear your story.

As people in the world recount your tale, your own sin shall be worn away, bit by bit and gradually you will become pure again. Brahma, ridicule is the atonement for you."

Everyone there laughed at me and their derision entered my ears like fire. Siva pronounced, "The four drops of your seed that fell on the earth shall be the stormclouds of the end of the ages, the clouds of the dissolution. Behold the Samvartaka, the Avarta, the Pushkara and the Drona!"

A clap of thunder and, roaring, four black clouds rose out of the ground. My seed had made the smoke from the damp twigs fruitful. Crackling dreadfully, those clouds hung overhead as Doom: his newest and most terrible servants, incredible mushrooms blotting out the sun. They erupted into jagged displays of blinding, many-hued lightning, or brief, lashing showers, as Siva waved his elegant hands at them like some unimaginable wizard. Then, at his dismissive wave, they flew out of the sky quick as thoughts. They vanished before we knew it, those lost children of my loins.

They that noticed saw how entirely calm young Sati was, while the Apocalypse hung above us and even the devas quailed.

I was quiet again. I accepted Siva's judgement gratefully: I realised how easily I could have died instead. We concluded the ceremony as if nothing untoward had happened. The devas rained flowers on the newlyweds. The gandharvas and kinnaras broke into resonant songs. Beautiful Rambha and her apsaras danced in sublime celebration. The other matter a thing of the past, Siva folded his hands to me and said, "Eldest of Gods, what would you have of me as dakshina for the wedding priest? Ask for anything."

I said, "Siva, stay here forever in this altar to remove the sins of men. I will build an asrama here and sit in tapasya. If a man visits this shrine on the thirteenth day of the bright half of Chaitra, when the day is the Sun's and the nakshatra Uttara Phalguni, let his every sin be quelled and all his ailments disappear."

Siva said, "So be it. For the sake of the people, Sati and I will remain here forever."

With his bride, he stepped into the heart of that altar and lo, a holy image appeared for the ages to worship. Then, because the subtle stars urged him, Siva hastily took Daksha's blessing for himself and his wife, Vishnu's blessing and mine. Setting Sati before him on Nandin, he set out for his Himalayan home of ice and silence.

I wonder if Daksha's resentment began there; he seemed put out by the inordinate haste. Then, he did not see how long and painful the way ahead was. As Siva embraced Vishnu in farewell, I thought I saw them exchange a smile of conspiracy, with a knowing look in my direction. It flashed through my mind that they had planned my humiliation together. But I had richly deserved it, my son," said Brahma of the marriage of Siva and Sati in the manvantara of Svayambhuva Manu,'

"My master said to me," says Suta to the enraptured rishis of the forest.

SEVEN

On Kailasa

'Rud' means misery and 'dravayati' means to root out. Rudra is the destroyer of our misery. Rudra's body is fiery and terrible. Shakti is of the moon. Nectarine, her body is the font of calm.

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'Brahma said,

"They arrived at his dwelling, a labyrinth of caves and an enchanted garden on the loftiest mountain. Siva dismissed his ganas and Nandiswara so he could be alone with Sati. He said to them, 'You will come to me only when I call you.'

They vanished from there. He was a novice at love, the great God Maheswara. Though inflamed by her presence, he began his courtship shyly. So far, she had been bashful, not even looking into his face along the journey, except when she could not help herself for the beauty of him. Now, as soon as he came and perched himself at her side, she took the passionate lead at love. She took his white, ash-smeared hand and brought it to her breast, dark as night.

Siva drew a sharp breath at the first touch of her velvet skin, her nipple alive against his palm. She cried out softly and Rudra bent to kiss her. First her hand, then fluttering tiny kisses all the way up her bare arm, he came to her neck and kissed her there; she trembled in her storm of love. Her red mouth found his lips and they remained like that for an eternity, oblivious.

Daylight faded outside the cavern. Gasping, they broke away from each other. Rising in the vast mountain silence, he led her out into the dusk to watch the sun set iridescent over fabled peaks.

As they stood enraptured, he wove sylvan flowers into a wild garland for her and laid it around her slender neck. He began to whisper into her shell ear, sweet nothings brushing delicate ridges. She shut her eyes and leaned against him, lost. Her fragrant breath heaved like the universe.

As the sun sank lower, he whispered, 'What is my name, do you know my name?'

She had yet to say a word to him. Not opening her eyes, she smiled and shook her head slightly. He insisted, 'Say my name.'

Still without opening her eyes, she caressed his face with one hand, standing there as darkness stole over them. Her other hand she sent down like fire over his body, down madly to the root of him, his sacred maleness, her small, black, red-nailed hand. Siva shook with her fever. The stars, which now pinpricked the twilight sky, quivered.

The sun had set. He carried her back in, light as a large lotus. When she opened her eyes again, she found she was alone in the cavernous chamber. Sculpted stalactites hung, breathtaking, from the lofty ceiling. The warm cave was strewn with a riot of garlands; soft lamps cast shadows on rock walls. She saw a mirror in a corner and, fearful lest she had spoilt herself for him, crossed to it to study her face. She smiled in the glass: never had she seen herself so radiantly beautiful. Even he, she allowed herself, would be pleased with her.

Suddenly, someone covered her eyes. She gave a little scream, but his touch was familiar. He stood behind her and his hands were on her face, her arms and her body: inhibition gone, the male in him in charge now. She melted in the laval desire licking her spine, waking the coiled serpent there; it fled up that stem to the thousand-petalled bloom unfurling in her head. His hands were everywhere, stroking her into a flame. Abruptly he stopped. Her breath came breathlessly and, opening her eyes, she saw his great chest also heaved.

She took his hand and stroked it to calm him: so they could begin all over again. She said her first words to him now, 'Siva, shall we wait a while?'

There was no reply, only his gaze. The silence in this place was deeper than any she had known. She was frightened; fear gave edge to her desire.

'Siva hold me, I'm afraid!'

'You said my name,' he smiled.

His hands began to undo the straps that fastened her robe. His breath caught in his throat when her breasts were naked in the lamplight. The garment he had peeled from her fell from his hands. He sat her upon a couch of down. Her wedding necklace sparkled on her dark chest; she felt

his kisses travel down her throat. She felt his hands slide down her body, those great and fine hands all over her, making her delirious.

He drank from her. She rippled in waves: out from the singing, rapturous point of her breast, down past her violet navel to the knot of her below, washing down to the soles of her red petal feet and up in a tide again to her head, exploding there in bursts of legend's bright foam. She was sobbing now, Narada, seeking him blindly with her fingers.

The sweet nectar of her was unbearably heady. He pulled away again, gently folding back her hand. With musk, he made marks like bees on her breasts. Laughing, he said of a mole on her, "This kaalika is a tiny you, as black, as irresistible!"

Beside himself, he drew away, but her hand still sought him recklessly. He cupped it in his own, stopped it, whispering hoarsely, 'Wait.'

And she, 'I cannot, my Siva!'

The Goddess in her would not be denied this experience of incarnation: the loving for which they had taken human form. He let her have her way with him in the worshipful dark."

Brahma paused, as if trying to fathom what happened in the Himalayan cavern.

Narada cried, "Don't stop, Pitama."

Shutting his eyes to better recall that sacred lovemaking, Brahma went on, "Now she called his thousand names, the Kotirudra with which she had once worshipped him. Her fingers were in his matted jata, holding him down to her without shame. Everywhere her hands flew over him, birds freed from a cage. She was no more her own mistress than he was master of himself. Another thing held them in its frenzied clutch, a love older than the sky or stars.

At last, he rose from where he knelt. With a hundred kisses, he pushed her gently onto her back; neither of them could wait anymore. Like a flower opening, she raised her legs and draped them over his shoulders, while she smiled sweetly at him though a haze filmed her eyes. She took his linga, radiant as a deity, in her hands. She breathed, 'My blood is for you, Siva, mark yourself with it.'

At that moment, Siva was lost in her ocean, in the tide that surged deeper than he knew. With a cry, he thrust into his beloved and the blood

of her maidenhood greeted him like aradhana. Her scream uncurled the nebulae and Siva was installed in the temple of Sati's divine body.

The universe breathed anew, as if born again, as he began to crest her waves and her wild cries pierced everything." said Brahma, peerless raconteur, to Narada muni,'

Matsyagandhi's great poet son, Vedavyasa, told me once, long ago,"
Says the Suta to the rishis.

EIGHT

She doubts him

The basic unit of life is the nimesha, the duration of a blink. Fifteen nimeshas make one kastha, thirty kasthas one kaala, thirty kaalas one muhurta; thirty muhurtas make one day. Thirty days is a maasa, a month, one day of the gods and the ancestors. Six maasas make one ayana; two ayanas, solstices, make one year. One human year is one day and night for the devas, uttarayana being the day and dakshinayana the night. Three hundred and sixty human years make a divine one.

Four are the yugas in the land of Bharata: krita, treta, dwapara and kali. The krita is four thousand celestial years long and four hundred years more is its sandhyamsa, its dawn and twilight cusps. The treta yuga is three thousand godly years long and three hundred more its sandhyamsa. The dwapara yuga is two thousand years long and two hundred years its dawn and dusk. Finally, the kali yuga lasts for a thousand celestial years and a hundred more its cusps.

A chaturyuga, a cycle of four ages, lasts for eleven thousand years of the devas. Seventy-one chaturyugas make a manvantara; fourteen manvantaras, a kalpa. Thousands of manvantaras have already been, hard to estimate in proper order. A kalpa of a thousand chaturyugas, twelve million divine years, is one day of Brahma. Eight thousand Brahma years are one Brahma yuga. A thousand Brahma yugas make one Brahma savana. Brahma's life is three thousand and three savanas long.

A day of Brahma's life contains fourteen Indras, their lives and deaths; his whole life five hundred and forty thousand Indras.

A day of Mahavishnu's is Brahma's lifetime. A day of Rudra is as long as Vishnu's life. Siva's day is as long as Rudra's life. A day of Sadasiva is as long as the life of Siva. A day of Sakshatsiva spans Sadasiva's life. This Parameswara, this primal God, controls Mahakaala, Time, from which everything originates and by which all things are destroyed, Kaala, caught in whose mouth the universe turns like a wheel. Kaala belongs to Siva who is known as Kaalatman, the Soul of Time.

Kaala is inscrutable; only Siva is beyond Prakriti, Purusha and Kaala.

*

‘Brahma said,

"Narada, the lovemaking of Sivaa and Siva, who never spent himself, lasted twenty-five divine years. For most of this time, he was inside her: the jewel was in the lotus! Yet, on occasion, he went off to gather lilies with slender stalks that glimmered with jewels like dewdrops, to drape over her nakedness. Among the mountain gardens they made love and in fine grottoes. She would not allow him to be apart from her for long, while they voyaged through mysterious realms of darkness and light in the crystal ship of their love.

Kama and Vasantha came there and everything around them bloomed out of season; a perennial, magic springtime came to Kailasa. Moons dipped in twilight; palasa blossoms like Kama's arrows at the feet of the trees. Like Kama's banners were the golden naagakesara trees in flower. Wafted on the malaya breeze, the scent of the clove on its vine was spice to love in that place. Mango and sali blossoms glowed like flames. Festive with lotuses, mountain lakes shone still and clear: like the minds of rishis where the reflection of the atman is immaculate.

Such were the days of their loving, what can be said of the nights? Every one with a full moon risen hypnotic into the sky, Sati's black skin glistening in the supernal light. Sometimes under her beloved, sometimes above him, moment by moment she grew into a profound mistress of love and satisfied him in his soul. She entered his body with loving, Muni; she drank of him and was never quenched. He too drank the nectar from her face; and drank on.

Then, once, out on a sheer precipice where they lay as one watching the stars appear, she said to him, ‘Siva, look how the clouds scarred me with hailstones as I lay oblivious in your arms. The swans have flown to the Manasa; high on the mountain, crows and chakoras are building nests to shelter from the coming season. My love, spring is over; even here, time flits by. Trees uprooted by the wind seem to dance in the sky. Gashes of lightning wear the faces of the Badavamukha and I fear the gathering stormclouds.

Siva, make a home for us on Kailasa, upon the higher Himalayas, or in Kasi down in the world.'

Siva stroked her satin side and she, distracted, fondled him absently in her lotus hand. He saw that, like any woman, she was bent on the home of which she dreamt. The crescent moon in his hair shone a beam down on them. He said softly, 'Of Kailasa, Sumeru or Jambu, choose any mountain. No raincloud, not Avartaka or Pushkara, ever rose to their summits. We will live on the one you choose.

Siddha women will be your sakhis and the naaga girls, the serpent lords' daughters and the turanga mukhis. Seeing you they will forget their own beauty and come to be near you. Mena, the mountain's wife, will be as a mother to you.

Sati, will you go to the Himalaya, where it is spring forever, where the ancient trees are kalpa vrikshas, where the rishis of peace live, where even beasts of prey are calmed? The home of devas, resplendent with ramparts of gold, silver and crystal, with lakes in which lotuses grow, stalks encrusted with jewels, where the sarasa and the chakravaka roost? Or will you go to Meru, where the apsaras Rambha, Sachi and Menaka shall have their beauty paled by you? Or will you stay on lofty Kailasa, near Kubera's secret city? You only have to tell me, my love.'

Looking into his face, Sati said, 'On Himalaya.'

Neither of them, adrift on the sea of their love, realised fate's long hand had touched her so she chose that mountain.

Siva and Sati went to a pinnacle of the Himalaya and were welcomed by the holy and ravishing siddha women. That peak had as many colours as the rainbow, with unearthly lakes and undreamed-of dark lotuses. The place glowed as if it was always dawn here. Crystal, rainless clouds hung in the lucid sky. Asvamukhas, apsaras, guhyakas, vidyadharas and kinnaras roamed free here: immortal folk as various and wonderful as the birds, the golden deer, the trees and flowers. For a thousand perfect, intoxicated years, Siva and Sati lived there, lost in each other. Until the day came, the unimaginable day, when Sati woke at dawn beside her lord and said to him, 'Siva, I am sated with lovemaking, tell me about the atman today.'

Painstakingly, he discoursed for a whole day on that profoundest guru, the soul. As the sun set, they were ragged for each other again and fell together as if it was their first night once more. There was no more asking after the atman from her, for a long time, but only the renewed

passion: as if with that break of a day, they had begun again at virginity. But how long would fate leave joy like theirs untried?

One day, Sati said to Siva, 'We have lived long enough in this place. Let us roam the world below, I have not seen it at all.'

Siva called Nandiswara to carry them down the mountain. Just then, something dark and furtive stirred in the depths of his mind; he could not put his finger on what it was. Down came Siva and Sati, onto the plains of Bharatavarsha. They roamed the ocean-girt world, illumining every place they visited with their grace.

Once they came to the numinous Dandaka vana. Marvelling at the richness they saw as they went along, Siva pointed out many old secrets of the vana to her; and she often noticed tiny, precious lives in the undergrowth and branches that escaped him. Then, they came upon Rama and Lakshmana, panic-stricken in the heart of that forest: Ravana had abducted Sita. Repeatedly, Rama cried out his love's name. His hands were clenched; his face was a mask of despair. Mangala shone a baleful light into his fortunes. Lakshmana was so distraught tears coursed down his noble face. He never spoke: he felt bitterly guilty that he had left Sita alone when his brother had told him not to leave her side for a moment.

Siva materialised before Rama in that glade of sorrow. He bowed to Dasaratha's son.

'Jaya vijayi bhava!' said Siva to Rama, blessing him.

Sati stayed invisible, watching and amazed by what her husband did. Rama bowed low to Siva and the brothers resumed their quest. Sati asked, 'Who are the two archers, Rudra? How did you bow to the blue and older one? Siva, how did you bow to a mortal?'

Siva smiled, he caressed her cheek. 'That was Rama and his brother Lakshmana. Ravana, the rakshasa, has carried Rama's Sita away to his island Lanka. Rama is the Sleeper on the Waters, Narayana incarnate. So I bowed to him, Sati.'

For a moment, Sati's face clouded with doubt: mortals were strange to her and she did not believe Siva. The dark thing in his heart clutched at Rudra again. Without pause to think, he said to his wife, 'Look, Rama has come full circle in anguish. If you doubt what I said, go and test him for yourself.'

Siva could have bitten his tongue the instant those words were out. He could not recall them. Sati accepted what seemed a playful challenge.

What did she know about Siva's oath to Vishnu and Brahma, *'If she doubts me for even a moment I will abandon her.'*

Sati assumed Sita's form and face, exactly and approached Rama. She flung her arms around him and wept as if she had been lost in the jungle. Rama did not see his wife there at all. He bowed low to the Goddess, 'Devi, where has Siva gone? Why, Mother Shakti, have you taken Sita's form? Do you mock my grief?'

Ashamed, Sati was herself again. She blessed Rama and went back to Siva.

Rudra asked her, 'Are you satisfied?'

Sati bent her head and said nothing. Yet, if only for a moment, she had doubted him. She had plunged after her doubt and now destiny must take its course. Siva said nothing of his rash vow to Vishnu; instead, he pacified his love, she was so disconsolate. She pined for a while; she seemed almost to be dying of guilt. It took all his tenderness to restore her spirits. Even when they made love in the vana that night she shook with sobs," Brahma said to Narada, his son.'

My guru Vyasa told me," says the knowing Suta.

NINE

Daksha's pique

Once, king Bhagiratha performed an ineffable prayatna to rescue his ancestors' souls from patala, where they had languished for an age. His father and grandfather had died in the same effort before him. So great were the sins of their ancestors, Sagara's wild sons, that only the waters of the Ganga, river of heaven, could purify the ashes to which Kapila muni had reduced them and grant them a place in swarga. For ten thousand years, Bhagiratha sat unflinching on the icy mountain. One day, when the power of his tapasya had grown irresistible, the Goddess Ganga manifested herself before him.

"Bhagiratha, tell me the boon you want."

Bhagiratha told her what he wanted. Ganga said, "Who will bear my descent if I fall into the world? I would plunge through the crust of the earth and down into rasatala. Besides, if I flow on bhumi, men will wash their sins in me and where would I purify myself?"

Bhagiratha answered, "Maharishis, seers of the Brahman, will dissolve the sins by bathing in you. And Rudra will bear your fall."

Down the pathway of the devas, Milky Way teeming with galaxies, rushed Ganga, past the moon. She fell squarely on Kailasa like the end of the ages, when the sky implodes on the earth. Siva caught the river in his jata and contained her easily. For ten thousand years, she was lost in his locks for her arrogance.

Bhagiratha performed another tapasya, for ten thousand years more: so heinous were his ancestors' crimes; at last, Siva released the river of three streams into the world, along a single hair of his head. Bhagiratha took one stream and went down to patala, where his uncles lay as ashes. The touch of her holy water renewed them; they were saved.

The first name given to Ganga on earth was Alakananda. When she falls down to Haridwara, she becomes Vishnupada. When a person bathes at Haridwara, a difficult place for even the devas to come to, he is purified of the sins of a million births. For this is one of the holiest tirthas in the world.

Siva says he once bathed at Haridwara and at once, he had Mahavishnu's blue form!

*

‘Brahma said to Narada, eager for him to continue his Purana,

"A great yagna was held at Prayaga once. The siddhas were all there, the divine rishis, the devas of light and the prajapatis. I went there too, with the agamas and nigamas, my train splendid around me. The enlightened asuras were present and Siva arrived with Sati and his ganas. We naturally offered him the seat of honour, Mahadeva greatest of Gods and the rishis explained the intricacies of the yagna to him.

Then, Daksha came to Prayaga. He had grown peculiarly arrogant after Sati married Siva. It was perhaps at root only grief at losing his daughter and a little pique that she had married someone greater than him. Daksha arrived with his wife Asikni and was formally welcomed. It was a solemn occasion and correctness in all things was in order. The rishis and all the others paid Daksha elaborate homage.

Siva did not rise or bow when his father-in-law entered the yagnashala and neither did Sati: here she was the Devi and Siva's wife, not just Daksha's daughter. Moreover, they would have brought sin on him if they, his superiors, paid him obeisance in that assembly.

Daksha was furious. He strode up to Siva and cried, ‘The suras and asuras, the mightiest in the universe, these rishis, the wisest in creation, bow to me. How is it that this man surrounded by bhutas and pretas does not even get up? Is the smasanavasi so full of lust that he forgets the holy conventions of the yagna? I curse you in this august sabha of brahmanas and devas. You shall not get your share of the havis, Ugly One, Siva of no pedigree. I, Daksha, expel you from the yagna!’

The rest of us were thunderstruck. Not I, who had noticed my son's pride growing for some time, expected such insanity from him. But Bhrigu and some others supported Daksha; they mocked Siva.

Rolling his eyes, Nandiswara closed on Daksha, ‘Witless Prajapati, how can you expel my Lord from the yagna? He *is* the yagna; his blessing makes the sacrifice fruitful. How can you, worm, dare curse the Sire of the universe?’

Daksha was beside himself. ‘I curse Siva’s upstart ganas: you are all expelled from the ritual! You will be abandoned by everyone that follows the Vedic path. You shall be heretics, outcasts from convention and society. You will be winebibbers, debauches, with filthy dreadlocks. Ashes and bones shall be your ornaments!’

Bhrigu and the others applauded. Nandin flashed at them, ‘Daksha you fool, your vanity deludes you. You, Bhrigu and the rest will be punished. You may prate about the Vedas, but you are ignorant of their inner truths. Dogs, you will be beggars in the world and sit over the yagnas of sudras. Lust, rage and greed will master you. The lustre will fall from your faces, Brahmanas and the bestial darkness in your hearts will replace it. Daksha, for your sin here, one day you will wear the face of a rutting animal!’

There was an outcry at this, but Siva remained calm. He saw clearly beyond the wrath of the moment, into Time’s deeper designs. He pacified Nandin, saying nobody could curse the atman. Daksha stormed out of that yagna with malice in his angry heart.

Some time elapsed, but the imagined insult rankled in the proud prajapati; and finally destiny overtook us all, softly. When Sati had almost forgotten the yagna at Prayaga, Daksha decided to hold a yagna of his own at Kanakahala, Gangadvara on the banks of the holy river. To share in that sacrifice came Agastya, Kashyapa, Atri, Vamadeva, Bhrigu, Dadichi, Vyasa, Bharadvaja, Gautama, Paila, Parasara, Garga, Bhargava, Kakubha, Sumantu, Trika, Kanka, Vaisampayana and many others, all sublime ones. They came to Daksha’s yagna with their families. The devas and asuras were there and the lokapalas, the guardians of the quarters of rising fortune. I went to my son’s yagna from Satyaloka, with the embodied Vedas. Duly invited like the rest, Vishnu came. But Daksha did not call either Siva or Sati to his sacrifice.

With his thought, Viswakarma created splendid mansions for the guests and we settled into them. Vishnu and the maruts sat over the yagna; I was the Vedic guru. The guardians of the directions were the dwarapalakas and at the altar the Devi Yagna herself, Sacrifice personified, reigned in all her beauty. Agni revealed himself in his diverse, flaming guises to receive Daksha’s fine offerings. There were eighty-six thousand ritviks at the yagna at Kanakahala, sixty-four thousand udgatirs and you went there, Narada and the other munis, as adhvaryus and hotris.

The saptarishis, Marichi, Atri, Angiras, Pulastya, Pulaha, Kratu and Vasishtha, intoned the saaman hymns in sonorous voices. The gandharvas were there, the vidyadharas, siddhas, adityas, all the nagas with their people, the brahmanical and the celestial rishis, the kings of the world with their armies and the eight vasus: Dhara, Dhruva, Soma, Apa, Anila, Anala, Pratyusa and Prabhasa. How radiant Daksha and his wife were in that august assembly.

When the svastyana was performed and the sacred thread tied around Daksha's wrist and Asikni's, Dadichi stood up, his face like thunder. He said angrily, 'Lord Rudra is worshipped by every being from Brahma down to the pisachas. Why is great Sankara not present here? Why is Sati not here? Go and fetch them, Daksha, or let Brahma and Vishnu. Otherwise, your yagna shall be damned.'

Daksha retorted, 'Mahavishnu, cause of all the Gods, is here. Brahma, the Pitama, is here and so are the devas and the rishis. Whoever is worthy of being here, has been invited and is present. Siva is not Sankara; he is far from benign. He is only the wretched Rudra, a killer full of tamas. He is naked and deformed, a kapalin, a skull-carrier. He has neither father nor mother and he is a lord only of ghouls and goblins. He is mannerless and vain and I rue the day my father persuaded me to give Sati to Siva. He is unworthy and I have not chosen to call him here.'

All the others agreed, Muni: they chanted, 'This is true.'

Dadichi stormed, 'Those that revile Mahadeva will lose the three Vedas when they are born in the kali yuga. Fools, all your tapasya will desert you then and you will go straight to hell. As for you Daksha: your doom is closer than you think. I say to you, you will meet it at this very yagna.'

Dadichi stalked out from that sacrifice.

Meanwhile, a day ago, under the canopy of the fountain house on fragrant Mount Gandhamadana, Sati saw her sister Rohini with her husband Soma the Moon and a colourful train. Sati asked her sakhi Vijaya, 'Where are Rohini and Soma going in such a hurry without calling on us?'

Vijaya went to Soma and said, 'My mistress Sati wants to know where you are going in such haste without seeing her.'

Soma said, 'We are on our way to Daksha's yagna. Are Siva and Sati not going?'

Vijaya came back to her mistress with the news. Sati ran to Siva's cave where he sat among his ganas. He took her hand and set her on his lap.

‘What is the matter, my love?’ he asked.

Sati's eyes were full of tears. She bit her lip and said desperately to him, ‘Daksha is my father; Virini is my mother. Why have we not been invited to their yagna, to which all the devas and rishis are going?’

Siva stroked her face, without replying. She cried, ‘Siva, come with me to the yagna. I am their daughter, so they did not think they needed to invite me as they would an outsider. Come, my Lord, let us go to Gangadvara.’

Siva said, ‘Daksha is your father, but you must realise he thinks of me as his enemy. He has not invited us to his yagna because he does not want us. Relatives’ taunts are sharper than arrows. I will not go to this sacrifice.’

But fate laid a hand on Sati. She said, ‘Oh my Siva, how will Daksha's sacrifice succeed without your presence? Yet, how do the devas and the brahmarishis attend it? If you allow me, I will go to my father's yagna and see for myself.’

Siva's heart skipped a beat: did she doubt him again? It was difficult to say Narada. Rudra said, ‘Go to your father's yagna, if you want. Take your sakhis with you in the pushpaka vimana, go with Nandin and my ganas.’

She set out with her companions, in the ship of the sky. That vimana was wrought from molten gold, embedded with jewels mined deep in the heavens and canopied with pearls from the ocean, each the size of a man's head. Flowers festooned the craft, which flew as quick as thought; coral steps led into the shining disk, windowed all around for breathtaking views when it was aloft. At the vimana's helm, a flagstaff flew the emblem of the bull. Inside, was a gemset throne for Sati; Rudra virgins fanned her with diamond-hafted chamaras.

Sumalini held a pearl-stringed parasol over Sati; Subhavati sat before her with a dice board. Suyasa carried her mirror, another sakhi her betel-box, another bouquets, another the talking parrot she loved, another the jewel-box. She shone among them like the full moon in August among the stars.

Sati wept when Siva embraced her before she left. She thought her heart misgave her only because it was the first time she was leaving him even for a day. All too quickly, when he had kissed her fragrant mouth in farewell, the conch sounded and a hundred bugles, the war drum and a thousand hands clapped together to mark the hour of departure. The chief of the ganas mounted Nandiswara and went ahead of Sati. The pushpaka vimana trembled for a moment, like a flower stirring in a breeze. Soft as a whisper, it lifted into the air. Sati flew through the sky swiftly as a wish and arrived in Gangadvara in the world below, at her father Daksha's yagna."

TEN

Daksha's yagna

Once, Hari said to Brahma, "Splendid Guru, come down from your lotus, I cannot support you anymore."

Brahma came down the infinite stalk; he merged with the chakra-bearer and fell into the sleep of Vishnu. Thousand-headed and thousand-eyed, Brahma slept, at one with Narayana upon the primordial sea of bliss, immersed in the Brahman without beginning or end. The next morning of eternity he resumed his yoga; four-faced again, he poured forth Creation.

Having emanated the waters, fire and air, sky, wind and earth, rivers, oceans, mountains and budded trees, instants, moments, minutes, hours, days and nights, fortnights, months, years and yugas, he made, from dark tamas, the asuras from his anus. Then he cast off his body; it became the night. From sattva he made the devas, from his face, then cast aside that body as well and it became the day. With yet another sattvika body, he created the pitrs. When he abandoned that body, twilight was. From a body of rajas came human beings, passion born, passionate; and from the sacrifice of this body came the dawn. From another body, of rajas and tamas both, the rakshasas were spawned, the nagas, the gandharvas, the kinnaras, the vidyadharas and the others that are half-divine.

At the beginning of Creation, Brahma emitted Sananda, Sanaka, Sanatkumara and Sanatana. But they were yogins, free from delusion, abiding in supreme indifference. For the first time, Brahma was filled with anger and tears of rage sprang in his eyes. When they fell on the ground, the bhutas and pretas were born. He was so distraught, hating himself, that he began to leave his body. Rudra was born from his dying breath and leapt out of Brahma's mouth, shining like a thousand suns, blazing like the fire at the end of the yugas. He came howling horribly and all creation trembled.

"Stop your roaring!" cried Brahma. "You will be known as Rudra for it."

The Pitama gave him seven other names: Bhava, Sarva, Isana, Pasupati, Bhima, Ugra and Mahadeva. He gave Rudra eight forms also:

Sun, Water, Earth, Fire, Wind, Space, the consecrated Brahmana and the Moon.

The blue and red God Rudra drank the immortal nectar known as AUM and he entered the passionless and blissful Brahman. At Brahma's instance, he created three-eyed Rudras exactly like himself in every way. They were all joyful, fearless, with tangled jata and blue throats; they wielded trisulas and rode bulls. All of them were free from ageing and death. When Brahma saw those hosts he grew perturbed and said to Rudra, "You must not create such awful beings free from death. Create others that are mortal."

Rudra replied, "Such awful creation is not for me, O Brahma: that I leave to you! These Rudras shall henceforward be my ganas."

Rudra was never again a Creator.

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‘Brahma said,

"Sati arrived at her father Daksha's yagna, which shone for yojanas with the presence of devas, apsaras and celestial beings of every kind. Her mother Virini and her sisters welcomed her with strained joy. Daksha was livid that she had come. He did not greet her; he did not even look at her. He signalled angrily to his wife and his other daughters, so they also drew away from Sati.

Now Sati saw her father's mood clearly. She saw the great shares of the yagna given to Vishnu, to me and the others; and none for Siva. She went up to Daksha. She addressed her father in a ringing voice, ‘Why do you slight me, your eldest daughter? Why do you slight my husband, who is the Lord of the universe? This insult to Siva will ruin you and yours.’

Daksha said, ‘My younger daughters are more worthy than you are. Their husbands deserve my respect, they are not like your Kapalin,’ and he laughed savagely.

Sati turned away from him and gazing fiercely round that yagnashala, cried, ‘How did Vishnu and Brahma, the devas and rishis agree to attend a yagna to which Rudra was not called? Vishnu, you sing of him as being saguna and nirguna; Brahma, he made you four-faced; Indra, have you forgotten how he made ashes of your thunderbolt? Atri, Vasishta, what have you done by coming to this sinful sacrifice?’

We squirmed to hear her, but what could we say? Even now, Daksha did not hold his tongue.

‘Why did you come here, woman? Don’t speak to me of your husband. Siva is inauspicious. He is not wellborn or noble. The naked, skull-carrying upstart is a king of bhutas and pramathas. This yagna is to repent for my sin of giving you to him.’

Then, more softly, ‘But you are our daughter. If you like, you can stay here and as my child I will give you your share of the havis.’

Sati said in deadly calm, ‘He who speaks thus of Siva, the dust from whose feet the devas wear on their heads, will go to hell: and those that listen unprotesting to him. My Lord was right when he said you were his enemy. Father, I am defiled by your arrogance. I should not have come here. I should have stayed with my husband, because now I can never go back to him. I am still your daughter; I am of your race, your flesh and blood, though I would not be. Evil Prajapati, how I hate myself that I am your child.

Her eyes blazed with rage and sorrow in equal measure. ‘Look, I cast off this body born from your loins as if it were a corpse. When I am born to a father I can love, I shall be Siva’s wife again.’

Sati grew awesomely still. She sipped holy water, she covered herself, head and face, with her garment and, thinking of Siva, entered a yogic trance. She balanced the winds, pana and apana. She lifted the third wind, udana, from her umbilical chakra up through her heart, up through her throat and fixed it between her eyebrows. In a flash, a fire from within consumed her body and it fell apart as ashes.

I knew it was time to make an exit. I vanished back to Satyaloka. I was shaking; I dared not think what Rudra would do when he heard what had happened. At the yagnashala, they were rooted in shock when Sati immolated herself. The devas, the rishis, even the darkest asuras were horrified. What she did was so sudden, Narada, so irretrievable.

Earth and sky resounded with the cries of Sati’s ganas! Then, wonder of wonders, instead of attacking anyone, they began to kill themselves, hacking off their own limbs in grief, until they fell dead beside their mistress. But those that were not quite so overcome began to make threatening noises. They clashed their weapons together and cried, ‘Death to Daksha!’

At which, Daksha's friend Bhrigu poured occult libations onto the dakshina fire, reciting the yajur mantra to quell the desecrators of the yagna. Demons of flame, ten thousand blazing ribhus, issued in a horde from the pit. Fire was their body, fire their weapon; and screaming horribly, they fell on the Sivaganas, while the guests at the sacrifice shrank back in terror. That battle was quick and one-sided. The ribhus burned the ganas like blades of dry grass and the few that escaped with their lives fled back to Kailasa.

Even as the devas stood and watched the bloodshed, tacitly acquiescing on Daksha's part, a voice of thunder spoke in the sky above them.

'Daksha, look what you have done. Couldn't you listen to Dadichi's warning? Let your yagna be ruined and your face burnt up by your sin. Vain Prajapati, this day shall be your last. And anyone that helps you: they too shall burn like moths!'

The devas and rishis stood stunned, the bravest of them quaked to hear that voice. But it was too late to relent; their lot was cast with Daksha.

Mortified, you, Narada, went with the ganas to Kailasa and they babbled incoherently to Siva about what transpired at Daksha's yagna. He raised a hand to silence them. Then he turned to you, Muni.

'What happened, Narada, where is Sati?'

Though you were never a coward, your knees turned to water and you trembled. Somehow, not looking into his great face, while his eyes never left yours, stammering, you told him about the tragedy. By the time you finished, you sobbed like a child. If Siva was sorry, he did not show it by crying. He grew quieter and quieter; his stillness was a thing of untold menace. At last, raising his face to the sky, Rudra howled like a beast of the wild that had lost its mate. It seemed the sun might fall out of the sky with that sound. His body shook in paroxysms, as shock struck him through. He fell down; he rolled in the dust. Then sorrow turned to wrath.

With a terrible yell, Siva sprang to his feet. He tore a long tuft of hair from his head. His grief was a grotesque dance that contorted his limbs in manic snatches of rhythm, while his bloodshot eyeballs rolled in their sockets, reminding you uncomfortably of the third eye, which so far, mercifully, remained shut. In the throes of that wild dance, he struck the mountain top with the jata. Even the ganas shut their ears at the report.

The tuft split in two, Narada, the earth cracked open in two places; or was it the sky, the very stuff of reality?

From the first cleft, sprang Virabhadra, towering over the mountain, with a thousand faces, a thousand arms and two thousand staring eyes. He stood before Siva. You had never seen the likes of that Rudra. He held a thousand weapons aloft, clubs, swords, maces, arrows, the bow Saringa, axes, a chakra, a vajra and a conch. He was an army by himself. He blazed like the fire at the end of time. His hair shone like the sun; his mouth was a chasm, with enormous, curved fangs. His belly was as big as the earth. His lips were thick as planets, hanging down. His tongue was a streak of dark lightning, darting this way and that. The crescent moon decked his jata, adorned with garlands from the heads of the great Gods. He wore a tiger-skin dripping fresh blood. He was resplendent in golden shoulderlets and anklets; he shone with a million precious jewels spangled across his body. His measureless chest bore ten thousand priceless necklaces. He was white as the moon, the lotus stalk or the chowrie. He was a mountain draped in pearls from ocean deeps. Countless flames licked around him like his skin, smeared from his head to his feet with ashes.

From the other half of Siva's jata, sprang horrible Bhadrakali. Her skin was black and thick; her face was hideous. She wore a necklace of human heads, not all of them dead. She dripped snakes from her body and her fangs dripped blood. She held a curved scimitar, her black mouth gaped wide; her tongue lolled red and she came howling so even Virabhadra backed away from her at first. She nuzzled the top of his head, as though he was her favourite child. Both visions of terror bowed low to Siva, who still stood shaking with wrath.

Virabhadra, who was only just born, said in a voice fathomless as the oceanic sky, 'Rudra, the sun, the moon and the fire your eyes, shall I drain the seas for you? Shall I smash the mountains into dust? Shall I ash the universe, or devour the devas? Lord, my right side throbs: with your blessing, today I can conquer the galaxies. Almighty Siva, command me.'

Siva blessed Virabhadra in a truly awesome voice, 'Jaya vijayi bhava! Daksha performs a yagna at Gangadvara. Go and raze that sacrifice. Kill the sacrificer. If there is any deva, gandharva or yaksha there, burn him. If Vishnu or Brahma, Indra or Yama stands against you, kill them. Go now. Come back to me only when you have destroyed.'

Siva's breath was fire. Thousands of Rudras more were born from that breath, flaming ganas, to be Virabhadra and Mahakaali's soldiers. Mounted on a bull among a guard of lions, Virabhadra marched at the head of that dreadful force. In the ranks, marched bhutas, pramathas, guhyakas, kusmandas, parpatas, chatakas, brahmarakshasas, bhairavas and kshetrapalas. With Mahakaali, went the nine Durgas: Kaali, Katyayani, Isani, Chamunda, Mundamardini, Bhadrakaali, Bhadra, Tvarita, Vaishnavi and the goblins, too.

Durga's yoginis went with that legion, sixty-four and terrible. Bhasitprabha was there, holding a pearl-handled parasol above Virabhadra and snow-white chowries in his hand. Bhanukampa blew a conch the colour of foam; Shankukarana marched with Virabhadra. Kekaraksha was there, Vikrita, Visaka, Pariyatraka, Saravanakaka, Vikratanana, Jvalakesa, Dhiman, Dudrabha, Kapalisa, Kotikunda, Vistambha, Sannada and Pippala, Avesana and Chandrapana, Mahavesa and Kundi, Pavataka and a hundred others, each with their thousands of ganas. Majestically, that army swept towards Gangadvara. When Virabhadra set out to kill Daksha, the kalpa vriksha showered unearthly flowers on him out of Amravati.

After Bhrigu's fire-demons routed Siva's ganas, the ceremonies and celebrations at Daksha's yagna were underway again. As soon as Virabhadra set out from Kailasa, all the guests, the devas and the rest, felt a tremor of fear. Evil omens thronged the sacrifice. Daksha's left arm, that thigh and eye, throbbed sharply.

An earthquake shook sacred Gangadvara. As in a dream, Daksha saw a mysterious and malignant cluster of stars at noon. The sun was blotched with black patches; a dark ring glowed balefully around the star. The quarters were squalid and gloomy, strange comets fell out of the dim heavens. Vultures circled low over the yagna, darkening the sacrificial platform; jackals howled at the perimeters of the conclave of rishis and devas. Like a pale scorpion, the evil nakshatra Netra fell from the sky, into which it should never have risen at this time. Meteors fell steaming; gusts of air blew swarms of moths and locusts into that tranquil place; Daksha's wonderful yagnashala bent and creaked in those ill winds.

Convulsions gripped Daksha and the devas. They vomited blood and pieces of raw flesh. Their spirits trembled like lamps about to be put out. They panicked as if they had been struck with weapons. Tears coursed down Daksha's face, his eyes were like the dying lotuses of summer. To

those eyes, the devas appeared to drip blood from all their limbs. The four quarters grew dark as night though it was midday and all around glowed a sinister aura of doom. Even Vishnu was touched by the moment's fear.

In that fear the devas cried, 'We are cursed!'

They fell on the ground like trees growing beside a river in spate. Terrified, Daksha ran to Vishnu, who alone seemed mainly unaffected by the elemental omens.

'What are these evil portents, Lord? You must protect me. Guardian of everything, don't let my yagna be ruined!'

Vishnu said, 'This terror is because Siva has not been worshipped here. Your daughter killed herself in that sorrow. You have sinned, Daksha, it will be hard to save you.'

Daksha sat on the ground and bent his head low. His face turned deathly pale. Then they heard the distant roar of the advent, by earth and air, of Virabhadra and his army. Quaking in every limb Daksha fell at Mahavishnu's feet. 'Only you can save me now!'

Vishnu said dully, 'We cannot stop Virabhadra even with worship. Be consoled, Daksha, I too will pay for being here. I will also burn.'

Virabhadra was at the gate. Led by haughty Indra, the devas were ready to fight. Indra laughed at Vishnu's fear. Then, from the air, Virabhadra saw the sattra with the devas' colourful flags flapping above it. He saw the freshly cut grass laid in neat, straight piles on the earth. He saw the thousands of golden sacrificial vessels. He saw the yagna fire kindled, burning high and bright. Virabhadra saw a thousand apsaras dancing; he heard sweet music dripping from gandharvas' flutes; he heard the soft, ceaseless chanting of Vedic mantras. Above him darkening the sky, around him in black tides, his Rudraganas swarmed. Virabhadra stamped his foot, rocking the earth. He roared so the devas nearest him shrank from the sound. Even the wind lurched in fear when Virabhadra roared.

Now the moment of reckoning was here, Daksha stood queerly unafraid at the altar and faced Virabhadra calmly.

Daksha said, 'Who are you and what do you want?'

Virabhadra still rumbled like a thundercloud, but a ghostly smile curved his lips. He fixed Daksha with a glare. Bhadra growled, 'We are the followers of Sarva of endless splendour. We have come for our share of the yagna.'

Daksha said, 'The mantras are our authorities. No mantras prescribe your share in the yagna.'

Before he finished, the mantras cried, 'Devas, your minds are taken with tamas. You do not deserve the first share in the yagna: let it be Siva's.'

None of the devas paid any heed and the mantras fled into the sky. Virabhadra said to the devas, 'You are so arrogant with power you do not accept even the authority of the mantras. Vain Devas, I will drive out your hubris. I will drive out your arrogance with your lives!'

With a flash of fire from his eye, Virabhadra burnt up the vedi, the altar. The gana lords, big as hills, uprooted the posts of the sattra and flung them away like wisps of straw. They seized the hotr priest, the prashtotr priest and the sacrificial horse and cast them into the Ganga. They smashed the golden vessels of the sacrifice and waded into the foodstuffs piled high for the guests, gorging themselves and throwing the rest on to sanctified ground.

Those pramathas were macabre beyond believing. They laughed; they ran about like children, they prattled nonsense. They leapfrogged over one another and turned cartwheels. When they had desecrated the sacrifice and stuffed themselves to bursting with food and drink, some leapt high into the air, swearing to bring the sun down. Others yelled they would catch the clouds and others that they would capture the wind.

Seeing all this, most of the devas fled towards their heaven without pausing to give fight. Only Indra and the lokapalas stood firm, with any stomach for battle. Virabhadra was furious when he saw the devas in flight, unengaged, uninjured. He roared again. He spewed flames from his mouth, colours from his tremendous body as white light, when split, does the spectrum. A wild elephant charging, he chased the fleeing devas, his trisula aloft. Shrieking in delight, Bhadrakaali pierced the devas in the sky with a thousand flaming spears.

Swifter than time, Virabhadra kicked Surya and his horse on the head. He struck Varuna with a sword; he smote Yama and Nirriti with an iron club. He hewed at Vayu with an axe. The gods in flight encountered Virabhadra as they would a cosmic army. He sang tunelessly and made other bizarre noises of joy as he fell on the devas of light.

'Indra, O Agni,' sang Virabhadra. 'Come Surya, Soma, Kubera, Varuna, Vayu, Nirriti, Yama, Sesha: O clever ones, come to me! You came

here for worship. Come to me, I will give you avadana.' Avadana, of course, meant both worship and dismembering.

He clipped off the tip of Saraswati's nose with his nails that he turned into glittering scissors and Aditi's, too. He lopped off Vibhavasus arm and his tongue with a dagger. He plucked the nipple off Svaha's breast, he gouged out Bhaga's eyes; he knocked out Pusana's teeth from his mouth and he ground Soma into the ground like a glow-worm under his heel. Bhrigu was smashed down and Manibhadra the gana pulled out his moustaches. Svadha, Dakshina, the mantras and tantras and all the women in that gathering, daughters, wives, daughters-in-law, were molested. Some were held down, screaming and raped by the odd-bodied bhutas and vetalas with monstrous phalluses.

Quickly, that yagnashala was devastated. The silver domes were smashed, the rishis killed, the devas who had not died put to flight. The yagna himself assumed the form of a golden deer and fled into the sky with Virabhadra in pursuit. The twang of Virabhadra's bow rent the heavens and he beheaded the stag in the air.

At last, Vishnu came to face Virabhadra. Virabhadra's face grew dark when he saw the Blue One. He knit his brows and stood growling like a lion. He taunted Narayana, 'Hari, how did you become the guardian of this Siva-less yagna? Didn't you see what Sati did for her Lord's honour? Did Dadichi not leave? Yet, you stayed to protect Daksha's sacrifice. You, too, are greedy for worship, long-arms and I will give you avadana.'

Mounted on Garuda, the Sudarshana humming at his finger, Vishnu faced Virabhadra in the sky. Bhadra rode a dazzling chariot given him by Siva, stocked with all kinds of weapons. He was bright as ten suns. Heartened by Vishnu sallying forth, the devas turned and came back to fight. Bhanukampa sounded Virabhadra's conch, which glowed like moonlight. The devas quailed at the blast; they prepared to flee again. At once, in reply, Vishnu blew a deafening note on the Panchajanya, rallying them. He froze the gana army for a moment on its murderous, rapacious spree: Virabhadra's forces stopped their ears with bloody palms.

The two armies fell roaring at each other. Indra faced Nandin. The king of the devas struck Siva's gana in the chest with his Vajra and Nandin pierced Indra with his trisula. They laughed in exhilaration at the equal contest, intoxicated with war. Asmana and Agni battled with spear and trident. Mahaloka locked with Yama, Munda with Varuna, Bhringi with Vayu.

Then, Bhadrakaali was among them like a conflagration. She came wearing wild elephants for earrings and she let flow the devas' blood in rivers. Thirstily, she quaffed that gore in the air and on the earth and the yagna grounds shone scarlet.

The quarters teemed with yakshas and vidyadharas, green nagas and wise siddhas, who braved the tumultuous battle to watch the duel between Vishnu and Virabhadra. As a cloud may the earth with livid rain, Narayana covered the gana army with arrows from the Saringa. The ganas screamed; they fell back in waves from the ferocious Blue Kesava. Now Virabhadra flew into the fray. He struck Vishnu with an arrow like a serpent, blazing like the sun. Mahavishnu fell in a faint, for the power of dharma was

against him now and the enemy irresistible because his cause was just. When Vishnu fell, a dark and eerie lustre arose everywhere, like the shadow of the Apocalypse!

In a moment, he awoke with a roar that shook the quarters. His eyes crimson, he raised the inexorable Sudarshana and cast it at the chortling lord of the ganas. But Khestrapala leapt up and caught the incendiary chakra in his mouth! Vishnu took Kshetrapala by the throat and forced out the wheel of flames. He strung his bow with an arrow that had his name emblazoned on it in letters of fire, a weapon that had never been resisted. When he shot that arrow at Virabhadra, the Rudra cut it in slivers with his own wizardly shaft. He broke the Saringa in Hari's hand with a silver volley and he singed Garuda's wings with two more astras.

With yoga and wrath, Mahavishnu now spilled a hundred Haris from his body, all with sankha, chakra and gada. Virabhadra made them ashes with fire from his eye. Vishnu raised the Sudarshana again; crying out an occult mantra, the Rudragana lifted his hand above his head and Vishnu's arm was numbed. Like serpent venom, the numbness spread through all his limbs. He gasped for breath, he trembled with rage and impotence: but he stood paralysed, as if he had turned to stone. Indra and the other devas rushed to Vishnu's side. With a mad laugh, Virabhadra froze Indra's hand with the Vajra; he froze all the others with just a look.

A thousand-armed, every hand aiming weapons in different directions, Virabhadra was like Brahma emitting the creatures. He covered the quarters with his arrows. The devas fell like flies on that battlefield, arms hewn off, faces pierced, eyes exploded. Roaring insanely and still laughing like the thunder at yuganta, the Mahagana now sought Daksha who had hidden among the ruins of the altar.

Whimpering, his clothes soiled in terror, Daksha was dragged by his cheeks from hiding. Virabhadra raised his sword and hewed at Daksha's neck. By the power of the prajapati's yoga, his head could not be severed. With his bare hands, then, Virabhadra tore my son's head from his neck and kicked it like a ball to Mahakaali. For some time, to the screams of those who watched, the pair kicked Daksha's head back and forth between them. Until, satisfied with his revenge, Bhadra kicked the ruined head into the yagna fire.

As soon as this was done, Narada, Siva appeared in the sky above. His hair the galaxies, his eyes the sun and the moon, Siva was calm again,

smiling down on Virabhadra and the frozen devas. He freed the devas from Bhadra's spell and they fell on their faces before Mahadeva, the God of Gods.

Vishnu said feelingly, 'Obeisance, O Hidden Secret of all lore! We have been punished for the sin of coming to Daksha's yagna. Forgive us, Siva, for the due has been paid in full: with dishonour and with death. Now be merciful.'

I, too, appeared in that place sodden with devas' blood and Siva laughed. I folded my palms to that boundless Deity. I said humbly, 'Rudra, destroyer of misery, forgive us.'

The devas that had survived the battle chimed in with some contrite worship. Gone was every vestige of pride, only shock remained with Indra and his kind.

'What had to be has been,' Siva said quietly. 'Besides, you are all my children.'

He made a mystic mudra of life-giving with his high hands and all the dead devas and rishis rose as if from a deep slumber: their limbs restored by his grace, their wounds healed. They prostrated before Siva, who chided Virabhadra kneeling before him, 'You have been too harsh to the rishis and the devas. Where is Daksha whose yagna this was?'

Virabhadra brought Daksha's headless body and flung it in the dust at Siva's feet.

'Where is his head?' asked Siva mildly.

'I threw it into the fire, Lord,' answered Bhadra anxiously, as if expecting to be reprimanded.

Siva said, 'Let Daksha be revived. Let him have the head of a goat.'

A sacrificial goat was beheaded and Daksha was revived with its head joined to his neck. Hands folded, he stood before Siva, 'Greatest of Gods! Forgive me, wretched sinner that I am, deluded by vanity: forgive me a thousand times for not remembering who you are. You are the Lord even of Vishnu. Siva, you are the first Creator and the Pervador. I wounded you with evil words. Ocean of mercy, may I pay for each one with a life of penance.'

Placing his hand on Daksha's goat head, Siva said gently, 'Fear no more, Daksha, complete your yagna.'

That yagna was completed and Siva had pride of place as the foremost Deity. He presided over the fateful sacrifice and the main

offering was made to him.

Only when Rudra returned to Kailasa, did he show any grief for Sati. He called his main ganas to him, Nandin and a few others and told them about his short and blessed time with her. Tears ran down Siva's face and he sobbed bitterly, 'The only lasting bliss is in the atman. This would never have happened if I had not allowed Brahma and Vishnu to distract me from my tapasya. My friends, I vow it shall never happen again.'"

Said Brahma,'

Said Vyasa, great poet of the Purana."

AMRITA

ELEVEN

The Goddess once asked Siva, "Lord, how are your bhaktas liberated in the kali yuga, when the world is enveloped in sin, when the people have turned away from Vedic rites, when danger is always imminent, when the land is perverted by alien cultures and customs, when the sacred order of guru and sishya has disappeared?"

*Siva said, "When ancient rituals are not available to them, the five-syllabled mantra purifies the people of the kali yuga. **AUM Namah Sivayah** protects those of the evil age that turn to me: though they are sinners, perverted in mind and body, in thought, word and deed! Devi, it is my sacred promise to the world that through my mantra the fallen shall rise and be free from their sins.*

Uma, those who subsist on air and water, emaciate themselves with austerities, do not reach me. But those that worship me with the simple mantra of five syllables do!

*It is by the wonder of the five-syllabled mantra that the worlds, the Vedas, the rishis, the dharma, the universe and the devas exist. **AUM Namah Sivayah** is the seed of all the living. It is you, the Goddess, my beloved, that mantra. It is the Goddess whose skin is molten gold, your breasts perfect, the moon your crown, your hands like tender lotuses, forming the mudras of granting boons and giving protection, wearing jewels from heaven, sitting in the white lotus, tresses shimmering wavy and blue: the Devi of yellow, black, gray, gold and vermilion!*

The mantra is adorned with naada and bindu: naada like the crescent moon, bindu the flame of the lamp. This mantra is the mulavidya, the sacred root. It is my own heart.

***AUM Namah Sivayah** is the raft on which my bhaktas cross the ocean of samsara," said Siva.*

*

Once, a gazelle-eyed vidyadhari of the forest gave the rishi Durvasa, believed by some to be an incarnation of Siva, an unearthly garland of santanaka flowers that she got from Vishnu. Riding Airavata, Indra met

Durvasa wearing the garland round his neck. Out of affection and to bless Indra to be sovereign of the three worlds forever, Durvasa threw that maala up to the king of the devas. Haughty Indra caught the garland and draped it around his elephant's neck. The flowery thing buzzed with intoxicated black bees. In terror, Airavata plucked it off with his trunk and, before the shocked Durvasa, the white elephant dashed the precious garland on the ground and trampled on Vishnu's gift.

Durvasa cried in wrath, "Arrogant Indra, even if that garland were just a gift from me, you should not treat it like this. It was a gift from Hari, a blessing and look what your beast has done to it. I curse you and the three worlds you rule, to lose your wealth. I curse the immortal denizens of your realms to old age and death!"

In a trice, Indra was on the ground and at the rishi's feet. He begged for mercy, but Durvasa thundered, "I am not compassionate!" and the curse remained.

Came the next war between the devas and the asuras. When struck by asura arrows, the devas fell dead and did not revive, as they always had before. Varuna and Indra conferred, but found no remedy for the curse. They flew to Brahma, who advised them to visit Vishnu. Narayana appeared before them as a towering mass of light, impossible to look at. Then, for the first time ever, he stepped out from that pure and formless refulgence: four-armed with sankha and chakra, blue and tremendous.

Vishnu said, "Devas, churn the Kshirasagara, until it gives up the amrita. Let the asuras be your allies in the endeavour, at least until the nectar of immortality rises to the surface. Agree to any condition they want and I promise you none of them will drink the amrita. Befriend them as the serpent does the mouse: to fetch it out of its hole!"

The devas went to Bali, the demon king enthroned in splendour after his recent conquest of swarga, bhumi and patala. The false devas bowed low. Indra said, "Bali, monarch of three worlds, your sovereignty is incomplete without the twin blessings that lie submerged under the Kshirasagara: the amrita and the most precious treasures in creation. Neither the devas by themselves, nor the asuras alone, can hope to churn the plumbless sea so both treasures and ambrosia are swirled to the surface. But together, we can surely accomplish this thing."

Just as the daitya's eyes began to gleam with interest, a disembodied voice spoke into that psychological moment. "Your labour shall be fruitful

if you use Mount Mandara as your churning-rod and Vasuki as your rope."

Into the milk-white foam of that measureless sea, the devas and asuras cast emetic herbs to make the nectar rise from the ocean's bed. Crying out and singing in great voices, with matchless sinews they uprooted golden Mandara and began to carry it to the sea of foam. The burden proved more than they could bear. Less than halfway to the ocean, they had to set the mountain down suddenly. A thousand devas and asuras were crushed and the survivors set up a loud wailing. Vishnu came down from the sky and, with just a finger, lifted Mandara. With a glance, he revived the dead asuras and devas. He hoisted the mountainous churning-rod onto Garuda's back and, climbing onto his eagle, flew to the Kshirasagara.

Bali and Indra went to Vasuki, the king of serpents in deep patala. They offered him a share of the amrita in return for being their churning rope. Tempted by the nectar of immortality, Vasuki came to the Kshirasagara and he was wound about Mandara. The devas seized Vasuki's throat to begin the churning, but Bali's demons would not have it.

"We routed these weakling devas on the battlefield, we are the lords of the universe. We were Brahma's firstborn sons. We will not hold the snake's tail!"

Vishnu smiled warningly at Indra, who at once begged Bali's pardon and took his devas round to the serpent's tail. They churned slowly at first, awkwardly: none of them had done this before. However, soon enough a rhythm was established and the churning grew expert and rapid. But the golden mountain began to sink into the sea and, try as they would, they could not churn swiftly enough to keep it afloat.

Vishnu became the primal Kuurma, strangest beast and he dived under Mandara and supported in on his stupendous shell so it stayed afloat. Singing for joy, they churned again with new equilibrium and greater speed, swirling the sea around like a milkmaid making cheese. Mahavishnu the Tortoise, big as a continent, laughed softly: the armies of darkness and light tickled his back with their frantic churning.

Now the mountain wobbled precariously, swaying this way and that, so the churning was not as effective as it could be. Vishnu came again to that shore of enterprise, thousand-armed and tall as the sky, blue as thunderheads and he placed a vast hand on the mountain's peak to steady it as the elementals churned. The mountain held straight. The churning grew

faster and faster as, shouting exhortation to each other, challenging one another, the two sides heaved the serpent king's awesome length back and forth. Golden Mandara spun like a top, now one way and then the other, with a whirring that deafened the churners.

At being hauled so violently, Vasuki began to vomit fire, smoke and venom over Pauloma, Kaleya, Bali, Ilvala and the other asuras at the head of the demon churners. He burned their gaudy clothes and garlands; he scalded their fine ornaments. Indeed, he would have consumed them with his flaming breath but Vishnu extinguished his exhalations with a fragrant thundershower from one of his thousand hands. At the Blue One's bidding, the sea of foam swelled with breezes, which blew the smoke away from the snake's hundred mouths.

They churned again. For ten thousand leagues around the golden mountain, the water stood stiff as froth, halfway to the summit of Mandara. Yet, no amrita was churned up. Unknown to deva and asura, Mahavishnu's own destiny lay below the white waves. So now, he took Vasuki's tail-tip in one immense hand and helped the asuras with another: he bent to churn the Kshirasagara himself. The churning was like prodigious lightning as Vishnu poured his infinite strength into it, also holding the mountain steady from above and below.

Unsettled from the deeps, teeming shoals of fish swam to the surface: dolphin and shark, swordfish and tuna, sea serpent and sea horse, sea elephant and alligator, whale and giant squid, colourful as another world. They swam up in terror, for the original venom, the halahala, stirred from its long slumber under the sandy ocean floor. It rose to the surface, smoking, staining the pale waves dark. The kaalakuta, bane of time, swirled straight up into the air: threatening to put out the sun in the sky, to burn up creation in a day!

Then deva, asura and rishi flew to Siva, with Vishnu himself at their head, he the one that first cried, "Only Siva can save us from the halahala."

"God of Gods," they begged him, high on Kailasa, "only you can deliver us from the kaalakuta. You are Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara, O Master of the universe, Source of the Vedas, O Pranava!"

In their dire need, all this was not just to worship him, but to placate Bhavani at his side. She was pleased at her husband having to quell the virulent kaalakuta. Siva glanced at her from the corner of his eye.

Vishnu said, "O Creator with agni your mouth, the earth your feet, time your motion, the cardinal points your ears, O Soul of all the devas, the sky your navel, Vayu your breath, Surya your eyes, Soma your mind, the swargas your imagination, the first ocean your semen, the first sea your belly, the mountains your bones, dharma your heart, the advent of evil your shadow!"

Therefore, of course, it seemed that no poison, even the terrible halahala, could affect such a One. Parvati still shifted uneasily beside her husband and looked askance at the petitioners.

Siva said, "It pleases Hari to help the devas and the asuras to churn the sagara. What pleases Hari pleases me."

Laying his hand on her arm, restraining Uma from any protest, Siva rose tall from Kailasa. Cupping his lotus-white hands, he drained the steaming poison from sky and sea. He quaffed it in a gulp, smiling. That poison burned even him; it burnt his throat blue. From then on, he wore it as an ornament on his neck and he was called Nilakanta since.

A few drops of the poison, which dribbled from his lips, were shared between the serpents, scorpions, spiders, lizards and the insects of the earth, to be their venom.

The devas, the asuras and Vishnu returned to their churning and now the sea yielded its treasures. First, from the churned waters came Surabhi: Kamadhenu dappled and lustrous, the first cow, of wishes. The devas stood staring at her and the asuras unwinkingly.

Varuni, the goddess of wine, rose from the foam, so lovely, her eyes rolling drunkenly. Next rose the lambent parijata tree and, in a moment, swept the worlds with its fragrance, capturing the hearts of the devastris. Then came Ucchaisravas, horse of light. From the spray of the amrita, rising slow and majestic from the deeps, from the very drops of flying nectar, arose the apsaras of matchless beauty, bright as fire, their skins translucent, bewitching all with their sidelong glances. To shine on them and the earth, came the Moon; and Sura, wine embodied and the bow Saringa, the hunting conch Panchajanya, foam-made and the scintillating ruby, the Kaustubha. Last of all, brilliant blue and long-armed like Vishnu, his eyes the hue of a red lotus, youthful, richly adorned, clad in fulvid yellow, rose Dhanvantari the physician: in his hands was a crystal chalice brimming with the amrita.

But everything that came so far was put in the shade when perfect Sri, Lakshmi, rose from the Kshirasagara: exquisite, naked and vibrant! A luminous lotus in her hand, she stood before them, all stunned by her; she lit up the quarters. She was utterly auspicious, she who is worshipped as the source of fortune, grace and affluence. The devas were smitten; Indra offered her his throne; the asuras were beside themselves. The rishis were lost: they hymned her loudly, babbling the inspired Srisukta. There was music in the air.

Led by Ganga, the holy rivers came, embodied, bringing their waters in golden pitchers for her bath. Airavata-sired elephants poured those sacral waters over her out of pale trunks, while Bhumidevi appeared, bringing ineffable Lakshmi the five precious ablutionaries. Vasantha brought her fruit and flowers of the vernal months of chaitra and visakha. The gandharvas arrived and sang in inspiration, while the apsaras danced as they were born to, this first time ever just for her, to the pulsating rhythms of mridanga, panava, murga, anaka and gomukha. The Vedas were chanted, while Lakshmi bathed, laughing softly with the joy of it all, the rapture of being. The amrita was forgotten when Mahalakshmi was born.

When she had finished bathing, Varuna brought two pieces of silken yellow raiment for her as an offering. He gave her the original vaijayanti garland, made from unfading blue ocean lotuses. Viswakarman brought ornaments for her flawless body, now anointed with sandal and saffron. She rose out of her bath, clad in Varuna's silks, sparkling with divine jewellery and the garland of wild lotuses in her hand. Now she looked around her for a sanctuary for herself, a home. She saw Vishnu, waiting with a quizzical smile on his face. Unhesitatingly, she walked up to him and draped the vaijayanti around his neck, resting her face, herself, against his chest. He put an arm around her, taking her to him forever. The heavens rained flowers down on them.

The rishis took Kamadhenu, the asuras took Sura and the humans took Dhanvantari. Vishnu took Lakshmi, the Saringa, the Panchajanya and the Kaustubha, which he wore round his neck on a golden chain. Surya took the horse Uchchaisravas, Indra the parijata tree and Siva took the Moon and wore it in his jata as a crescent ornament. Varuna took Varuni for himself; the amrita-born apsaras were shared by deva and asura alike, hereafter, depending on which race ruled the worlds.

When Lakshmi walked up to Vishnu and draped the vaijayanti around him, the asuras woke rudely from their daydream of keeping the Goddess for themselves. Bali snatched the chalice of amrita out of Dhanvantari's hands. Inevitably, the demons began to fight among themselves: who should have how much of the nectar, who should drink it first and who last? They snatched the chalice, one from the other and the devas joined the fray. Suddenly, a woman, such as they had not dreamt of, appeared among them. Not even Sri could match her beauty; but while Lakshmi was a vision of purity, this dusky one came among the asura warriors with undisguised lasciviousness.

In contrast to the fair Lakshmi, the seductress was as blue as the lotus of the forest. Her skin was satin; her breasts were heavy, straining against each other in the bursting ebullience of youth. Her waist was a reed, her behind ample; her jet-black hair was profuse and adorned with white mallika flowers. Her nose, her bones, her cheeks, her ears, were all absolutely delicate; her neck, her bare arms were dreams. Her navel showed deep as a well above a golden girdle draped sensuously over hips that flared maddeningly. For all her loveliness, her eyes were like frightened birds, darting this way and that. The asuras gaped at her, the devas stood spellbound: both stared, hearts on fire.

At last, Bali cried hoarsely, "Vision of perfection, whose daughter are you? Surely, you are no man's child. You are not tainted by the touch of deva or asura, gandharva or siddha, or you could not be so immaculate. Peerless one, share this amrita even-handedly among us."

He handed the chalice of nectar to Mohini; for so she was, an enchantress. She laughed at him as she reached out to take the precious thing from Bali's hands, which trembled just to brush against hers. In her breathy torment of a voice, she said, "Sons of Kashyapa, how do you come near a wanton woman like me? Haven't you heard the friendship of loose women is just for the moment?"

Grinning vacantly, Bali still thrust the amrita at her. Throwing back her head, she laughed huskily. With such a coquettish smile, she said, "Only if you accept whatever I do, whether it seems right or wrong, will I divide the amrita among you."

"So be it!" cried the asuras in one voice. She sent them to bathe, to purify themselves before she gave out the nectar. When they returned, she made them sit in an incense-fragrant hall, which appeared there

miraculously. She sat them on mats of kusa grass, whose blades pointed to the auspicious east. When they were all silent in the hall lit by soft butter lamps, she came among them, enchanting them with her gait slowed by the weight of her hips. Her glances were shy, yet so brazen and the nectar was in her hands.

In that lustful quiet, her anklets sang like a forest of birds. She made them sit, devas and asuras, across the hall from each other. As she showed the asuras to their places, as if by accident the silken cloth fell away from her naked breasts. She took it up again, but none too quickly. With a velvet giggle, full of promises, she whispered, "Let the niggardly devas drink first, I will save the most for the end."

She winked at them, promising not only the amrita. Then, hips swaying, she crossed to the devas; smiling over her shoulder at the demons, she began to pour out all the nectar just for the gods of light. She took her time. Though they grew restive, the asuras dare not cross her: they waited, all of them except Rahu. With maaya, he assumed the form and raiment of a deva; he stole across to the other side of the hall and into the line of nectar drinkers, between the Sun and the Moon. Mohini served Rahu and Surya and Soma cried that he was not what he seemed. But Rahu had drunk the nectar and, becoming himself in a flash, Vishnu, for he was Mohini, struck off Rahu's head with the Sudarshana chakra before the amrita went down his throat.

chakra-borne, Rahu's head flew immortal into the sky, while his body fell dead on the ground. Vishnu granted planethood to Rahu. Each day of the new and full moon, Rahu tries to swallow both Surya and Soma Deva, between whom he sat to drink the amrita.

The devas had drunk all the nectar and, smiling triumphantly, Vishnu was himself again. Realising they had been tricked, roaring, the asuras attacked the devas. Vishnu drove them back with his chakra and down into patala, killing many; while the devas were now immortal and rose to fight again even if they were hewn down. In terror, the asuras fled to the under-worlds.

Some say that when Siva hears how Vishnu tricked the asuras, he comes with Uma to Narayana's garden in Vaikunta. He says to the Blue God, "Hari, I have seen all your Avataras, but not this one of the woman Mohini."

Vishnu laughs. "I wanted to excite the asuras, to deceive them. Siva, what would you do seeing the Mohini, who was seduction personified?"

Siva insists and Vishnu vanishes before their eyes in that garden. Siva and Parvati wait there for a while, but there is no sign of either Vishnu or Mohini. They are about to leave, when they see her under some flowering trees, amidst red foliage, playing with a ball: Mohini, enchantress. With each step she takes, she appears to break in two at her waist, so slender is it; and her breasts so full, throbbing with youth, while a string of great pearls lies over them like small moons. Her eyes swimmingly follow the lively ball.

Those who tell this tale say that, seeing Mohini, Siva loses control of himself. When the blue ball bounces away from her, she stands fidgeting with her dishevelled braids and her silken garment that fell away before the asuras. As in a dream, leaving Uma and his ganas, Siva goes to retrieve her ball for Mohini. A thing of enchantment itself, the ball bounces and rolls a long way and chasing it, Mohini and Siva are soon at some remove from the others, who stand dumbfounded.

When Siva picks up the ball for her, a hot gust of wind blows the diaphanous garment away; her girdle slips away from her waist to around her ankles. The scent of her naked body pierces him like an astra and Siva seizes the seductress and tries to ravish her even as Parvati stands watching!

Mohini vanishes out of his embrace. She reappears behind another tree, laughing in her tinkling way. Hopelessly aroused now, under her spell, Siva runs to her. Behind the tree, he pierces her with a thrust of fire; then moves in lightning flashes while she screams: the great Lord Siva, groaning like any lost man.

She weaves out of his embrace and runs from him, long hair streaming behind her ravishing nakedness. Like the wind, she runs from him. Rudra chases her witlessly, his seed spilling in copious spurts. Over the mountains she flies, him hot on her heels, across rivers and their soft banks: he ejaculating in geysers in the heat of the chase. Until, all his seed is spilt onto the earth and he stops his frenzied career. Mohini changes back into Vishnu and confronts Hara. Siva begins to roar with laughter: they hug each other and dissolve in mirth.

There are also those who say that Mohini does not run far from Siva; but he catches her and from their loving and from Vishnu's thigh, Ayappan

the tiger-rider is born: the bachelor God of Sabarimala, Hari-Hara putra.

Another story tells of how, at first, the apsaras are shared by deva and asura alike. But when Lakshmi attaches herself to Vishnu, Bali's demons forcibly take all the nymphs for themselves and wrest the amrita from Dhanvantari's grasp. Certain of having imminent immortality, the demons swear, "If we are vanquished by the devas we will never touch these women."

When Mohini tricks them and the devas drink all the amrita, the demons bay for blood; they attack Vishnu and the gods of light. After the asuras are routed and flee down into the patalas, Vishnu becomes intensely sensible of the exquisite, haughty nymphs. He dallies with those nectar maidens: very willing to make love with the Blue God, to hone the genius with which they are born.

He loves them all, goes the legend and begets myriad sons on them, every one a blue kshatriya and, like him, a master of knowledge and war. Vishnu is lost. He descends into the under-worlds with his seraglio of apsaras.

Brahma comes to Kailasa and begs Siva, "Pervador of the stars, Narayana is lost in the lust of the apsaras and no longer protects the worlds. His sons run riot through the universe, only you can save us."

They say Siva becomes a mighty bull and, bellowing so the sky quakes, confronts the sons of Vishnu. Arrogant by their birth, those warriors are furious that this mere animal dares challenge them. With fierce yells, they rush at the bull. They rain arrows on him, they strike him with sword, spear and mace; but he is proof against their every ferocity. Rudra the bull turns on the apsaras' sons. He kicks them with awesome hooves; he rends their divine bodies with his horns and kills the lot.

Hearing the uproar of this battle, Vishnu rises from his patala of lubricity and attacks the bull with arrows of light and time. He covers the Vrishabha with a storm of shafts that fall tamely off the animal's hide. The beast charges Hari and strikes him to the ground. It gores his chest open, spilling his blood onto the earth like rain: only then, Mahavishnu remembers himself. Hands folded, he says to Siva, "Ocean of mercy, forgive me! I did not know it was you."

Smiling a little, Siva says, "You were not yourself for a while, Saviour of the galaxies."

Meanwhile, Vishnu has already advised the other celestials that in the under-worlds live the innumerable apsaras, who have been born for the enjoyment of all and that they are mistresses of pleasure like no other women. The devas plunge down as a man to the patalas to seek untold satisfaction in the arms of the nymphs. After bringing Mahavishnu back to his senses and Lakshmi's bed, Siva warns them with a curse, "Except a quiescent rishi or a danava born of my body, any man that enters the apsaras' realms, will find his death."

So, following Vishnu back into heaven stream all the forlorn vidyadharas, apsaras, yakshas, rakshasas, kinnaras, gandharvas, pichasas, guhyakas, siddhas and bhutas. And all is well again in the worlds, say those who relate the story of Siva the bull.

THREE INCARNATIONS

TWELVE

The devout harlot

*Once, Vishnu and Brahma stood humbled before the linga of fire manifested between them, linga without beginning or end. When they flew down as the Boar and up as the Swan and failed to find the linga's root or head, they returned and stood wondering, 'What might this be?' For the first time, they heard the holy noise **AUM**!*

*Vishnu, purest of the pure, saw the Sabdabrahman materialise. He saw the syllable **A** first, to the south of the linga, a blazing sun. Then he saw the **U**, dazzling like fire, to the north; in the midst of the linga he saw the **M**, like the moon; at last, he saw the Naada at the brow of that linga. Beyond it, he beheld the Bindu, the Singularity and beyond that, the supreme Brahman, the deepest refuge, with the lustre of pure crystal, the being beyond the fourth: the Turiya, one, void, without beginning, middle or end. It was the truth, the bliss and the nectar!*

*Yet, neither Brahma nor Vishnu could comprehend Pranava divided in four; so, Pranava became the Veda. The **A** became the Rigveda, the **U** the Yajurveda, the **M** the Saamaveda and the Naada at the end became the Atharvaveda. Brahma came from the Rig, with the qualities of rajas, Vishnu from the Yajur, which was sattvic and Rudra from the Saama, tamasic. The Atharvaveda was beyond the gunas.*

*Brahma emerged from the right side of Mahesa, Vishnu from the left and Nilarudra from his heart. In the beginning, intoning **AUM**, Sadasiva created the universe. Siva is Pranava and Pranava is Siva.*

*

A human birth is rare even for the devas and asuras. If one does not strive for moksha after being born a human being, one rues it long when one is dead.

Once, in Nandigram, there lived a courtesan called Mahananda. She was a great beauty and a Sivabhakta. Mahananda was a most talented woman, charming and gracious, brilliant, adept at singing and even more

at voluptuous love. Queens and kings were delighted by her; fortune smiled on her and she was counted among the wealthy of the town. With devotion and joy, Mahananda worshipped Siva. She wore ashes and rudraksha and chanted the Lord's thousand names. She danced like a dream for him, none else, though the people thronged to watch her.

Mahananda kept a monkey and a cock. She hung rudraksha on them; she taught them to dance while she sang, keeping time by clapping her hands. With its red rudraksha earrings, the monkey danced like a gifted child and the bright cock with the sacred beads tied around its comb. Those who watched were swept by unworldly delight, while Mahananda filled the house with her clear laughter, verging on ecstasy. For the song and the dance were always for Siva.

Her loving too, at which she was so uninhibited and generous, was for him, in bhakti: to please his creatures, men, to give them as much delight as she could. Mahananda would do anything a man wanted and so willingly and exquisitely that no man ever boasted of the pleasure he had with her; as men frequently do when they have had no pleasure at all. Love with Mahananda was a precious experience. Everywhere, even into the realms of the gods, spread the fame of Mahananda the devout harlot.

One day, a stranger made his appearance in Nandigram: a merchant and obviously a bhakta. The tripundra marked his brow, rudraksha was round his neck, his body was ash-smeared, his hair matted in jata and around his wrist was a priceless, gemset bracelet. Mahananda welcomed the traveller as if they were blood relatives by their common bhakti. She brought him in to her home, ensconced him in her best chair and fed him like a king, though he was a stranger.

Mahananda had a weakness for jewellery and she could never resist the temptation of frequently adding to her rich collection. Her eyes grew round when she saw the bracelet the merchant wore. Mahananda was a connoisseur; she knew a great piece of jewellery when she saw one.

Shyly, but unable to help herself, she said, "Sir, your bracelet is worthy of being the ornament on an apsara's wrist."

The merchant replied suavely, "It can be yours, gentle lady. But what price will you pay for it?"

He was rewarded by Mahananda's gayest laughter. She cried, "Sir, we are not chaste women in our family, but whores. If I take the bracelet from you, I will be your wife for three days and nights."

The merchant cried, "With the Sun and the Moon as witnesses, say 'Satyam' thrice and touch my heart with your hand. Then be my wife for three days and nights and I will give you the bracelet."

Mahananda said, "Satyam, Satyam, Satyam! I will be your wife in body and soul for three days and nights."

The merchant took the bracelet from his wrist and tied it round her slender one. Thus, he married her and kissed her passionately. Then he gave her a brilliant, jewel-studded linga and said, "This is the dearest possession I own. Keep it carefully for me until I leave."

Reverently as any wife would, she took the linga and locked it away in a niche in the dance hall in her courtyard. She went back to him and they spent a torrid night of love. Never before had Mahananda known a man of such tenderness and virility as this rough and elegant merchant. She wondered if their 'wedding' had anything to do with the night's magic, this rapture. No one had ever made love to her as this vaishya did.

At midnight, they fell asleep in each other's arms and she dreamt of being his wife forever. That night, Mahananda whose mothers had been courtesans for generations, every trick they knew, had cried out again and again in her fierce lover's arms, with no trace of pretence. Why, he had done what no other man could boast of: he had got her drunk, while he drank twice as much she did and not a slur from him.

In the small hours, a fire broke out in the courtyard. Fuelled by an uncanny wind, it blazed through the dance hall, burning it down. Woken by a nightmare, Mahananda sat up in a sweat of fear. She smelt smoke; she shook the merchant awake. They ran out together to see the monkey and the cockerel aflame, shrieking, running round the yard like a twin omen. As they watched, the two creatures blazed briefly and fell. Among the smouldering embers of the dance hall, the merchant and his harlot wife for three days found the holy linga. The freak fire had destroyed it, extinguished its jewels.

The merchant cried, "There lies my soul, dead. I cannot live anymore. Tell your servants to make a pyre for me, I must burn myself tonight. Don't try to restrain me; not Brahma, Vishnu or Indra can."

After his lovemaking, she knew the tenacity of his spirit: he surely meant to kill himself. Quietly, she ordered her servants to heap the pyre. Thrice, the grim merchant walked around it, chanting Siva's name; then he

walked into the flames, as calmly as if he was wading into a river to bathe. Quickly, he was ash.

Mahananda grew terribly disconsolate. She said, "He died because of me and I was his wife when he perished. Though all too briefly, I loved him. Now I am his widow and I will follow him into death. My truth lies there and there is liberation only in truth."

Her mother and her sisters cried, "You have gone mad! We are whores, we do not marry or become wives."

Mahananda was adamant. She willed all her considerable wealth and property to her family and to charity. She too called fervently to Siva and circling the fire that had claimed the body of her husband for three days, she walked into its flames. Siva stepped out of that fire before it could touch her. He was three-eyed, the crescent moon scintillated on his head; he was bright as a hundred suns and he took her hand. She was stunned: the Lord had the merchant's face! She was confused and terrified by his irradiant presence.

He said tenderly, "I came to test you, lovely woman. I was the merchant. I burned the dance hall and the crystal linga; I walked into the fire. Mahananda, your virtue is immaculate, your faith perfect. I will give you whatever you want, pleasures the devas cannot dream of, anything."

When she found her voice, Mahananda the pure harlot said to Vaisyanatha, the merchant Siva, "Lord, all I want is to touch your lotus feet. My family here and my servants, are your bhaktas. Siva, take us to your world, free us forever of the terror of rebirth."

For love of his devout whore, Siva took them all to moksha in Sivaloka. He revived the monkey and the cockerel and liberated them as well.

THIRTEEN

King Bhadrayu of old

The sannyasin rose during the Brahma muhurta, the hour before dawn; it was still dark in the world. He meditated on Siva within his head: the guru in the thousand-petalled lotus, the master like transparent crystal, hands raised in the twin mudras of protection and boon, the perfectly beautiful guru. The sannyasin bowed, his palms folded to Siva; he worshipped him with fragrant flowers of his imagination.

"Lord, let whatever I do from sunrise until sunset and from sunset to sunrise, be worship of you."

He controlled his breath, brought every sense under his will and meditated on the six mystical chakras in his body, from the muladhara to the brahmarandhra. He thought deeply on the Nirguna Sadasiva, the Brahman whose body with the splendour of a billion suns is Satchitananda: existence, knowledge and bliss.

He thought, "I am He!"

*He covered his head and nose with a square of cloth; he laid some grass on the ground and emptied his bowels. Holding his penis in his left hand, he rose and went to the pool where he washed himself. Intoning Pranava in his mind, he faced north and cleaned his teeth with a neem twig. He bathed, scrubbing himself with clay. Joining his hands in a sankhamudra, shell-like, he poured water over his head twelve times, saying **AUM**. He wiped himself dry and tied a clean loincloth round his waist. Chanting the Sadyadi mantra and the Agniriti, he smeared holy ashes over himself. Touching his navel, elbows, shoulders and back, he washed both his hands and performed achamana twice, rinsed his mouth.*

He scooped up some water in his right hand: covering that hand with the left one, he intoned Pranava twelve times. He sprinkled the water thrice on his head and drank three sips of it, meditating on Omkara, on Siva who lives in the heart of the sun, God of all glory, eight-armed, four-faced, half of him female. A hundred and eight times, the sage offered the Gayatri japa, tarpana twelve times and, after another achamana, he controlled his breath in pranayama twice.

Then, he went to the mantapa of worship and entered right foot first. The sun had not yet risen.

*

In ancient times, Siva blessed the devout king Bhadrayu. The Lord came to him in a dream as a bull and then on, Bhadrayu conquered all his enemies easily and extended his sway far. He married the chaste and pious Kirtimalini. Once, as spring came over the land, Bhadrayu and his wife went into the forest to sport: in that vana, Siva sported with them.

Bhadrayu was proud that he was a protector of his people, their refuge at all times; he often boasted of this. Suddenly, in a clearing in the forest, a brahmana and his wife came running headlong through the trees, screaming for help: they were being chased by a tiger that was a demon, he was Yama incarnate. Bhadrayu seized his bow and cried there was nothing to fear. With a shattering roar, the tiger bounded into the clearing, pounced on the brahmana's wife and carried her off. She screamed, "Save me, O King!"

Bhadrayu shot a quiver of devastras at the beast, but they fell off his striped hide like bits of straw. He was a magic tiger, made of illusion by Siva! Such a bewailing the widower brahmana set up. Tears streaming down his face, he turned accusingly on Bhadrayu.

"What avail are your weapons now? What use is your legendary strength, your great bow, your sword, or your devastras? A kshatriya's first dharma is to protect his people with his very life. Your family's honour is lost, Bhadrayu. It is better you drink poison or walk into a fire than live a life without dharma."

The brahmana's every word pierced Bhadrayu's noble heart, a flaming truth. The king fell at the brahmana's feet, he cried, "My manliness is lost, my ancestors' virtue has perished. My fame is ashes; I have committed an awful sin today. Brahmana, I am a base, weak kshatriya; have mercy on me. You can have whatever you want from me. This kingdom is for you; I am your slave. My wealth, everything that is mine shall be yours. Do not grieve!"

The brahmana said, "What will a blind man do with a mirror? What will a fool do with a book? What will I do with wealth when I have lost my wife? If you truly mean what you say, there is only one possession of yours

for which I have any use, just one that can repair my loss. Give me your queen!"

Bhadrayu cried out as an animal struck by an arrow. "My kingdom is yours, my horses, my elephants, my army, my riches, even my life. But I cannot give you my queen. Brahmana, dreadful is the sin of sleeping with another man's wife."

The brahmana scoffed at this. "Let it be the murder of a brahmana, let it be perpetual wantonness and wine: I wash these sins away easily with tapasya. What then is the sin of enjoying another's wife? No, Kshatriya, if you don't want me to curse you, give me your queen."

Bhadrayu knew dharma demanded he gave his queen to the widower. He thought, "I will give my Kirtimalini to the brahmana and walk into a fire. Then my honour will survive and I will escape sin."

With a ritual of holy water, he gifted a tearful Kirtimalini to the brahmana. Then he bathed. He prayed to the Gods. Fixing his heart on Siva, he walked thrice in pradakshina around the fire he had kindled. Bhadrayu was about to step into those flames when the brahmana took his hand.

Siva stood revealed before the king! His brahmana's guise abandoned, the Lord stood there: five-faced, three-eyed, the Pinaka in his hand, glinting by the light of the moon on his jata. He was brilliant as a star, white as a lotus. He wore Gajasura's elephant-hide, his hair was wet with the Ganga's waters and he had living green serpents for necklaces. He stood smiling indulgently, with the exquisite Sivaa beside him.

The heavens marked Bhadrayu's bhakti with a shower of unearthly petals. The king himself stood stunned, his skin crawling, his head bowed before the Vision, tears coursing down his face. Siva and Parvati blessed Bhadrayu, they told him to ask for any boon.

In a quivering voice, Bhadrayu said, "Lord, my greatest boon is that I see you before me, amidst this samsara. But if you would grant me another boon, Siva, let my father and my mother, Kirtimalini and I, my friend the vaishya Padmakara and his son Sanaya, all live near you forever."

Kirtimalini asked Sivaa, "Devi, let my father Chandrangada and my mother Simantini live near you too."

For ten thousand years, with Siva's blessing, the ancient king Bhadrayu ruled, peacefully and wisely. Then, he left his kingdom to his

son and went to eternal bliss with his Kirtimalini, at the Lord's feet.

He who reads or tells the tale of Siva's incarnation as Dvijeswara, the brahmana, never swerves from dharma and he surely attains moksha one day.

FOURTEEN

Arjuna's boon

When the sannyasin entered the mantapa, he tested the ground by smelling it, he inspected its color by lamplight; he also tasted the earth. He had erected a canopy above. Now he scrubbed the floor of that mantapa, until it was smooth as a mirror. Carefully he drew a square, with each side two aratnis long. Inside the square, he drew others, the width of a palm leaf, so there were thirteen squares in each column, every way, a hundred and sixty-nine in all. The leaf he used to measure the small squares he placed within the large one and he sat down facing west.

Beginning with the east, on short sticks he tied a red and yellow thread, which he wound all round the large square. The small square at the heart of the large one was the corolla of the mystic lotus. The eight squares immediately around it were the petals. He painted those petals perfectly white; the corolla he painted yellow and drew a flame red circle inside it. Beginning with Indra's petal on the right, he coloured all the petals alternately black and red.

*He inscribed the yantra for Pranava within the pericarp and drew the yonic pedestal beneath. He drew Srikantha above it, Amaresa above this, with Mahakaala in the middle. On top, he drew the staff □ the danda □ and beyond that, Iswara. The Pitha he painted blue, Srikantha yellow, Amaresa red and Mahakaala in resonant black. He coloured the staff gray and smoky and Iswara white. After he drew the yantra, the **AUM**, he encompassed the red Amaresa in sadya.*

*He painted the four corner squares white. With red mineral chalk, he inscribed the first four letters of the alphabet, **a aa i** and **ii**, and they were the four doors. The two squares next to each of these, he painted yellow. Within the yellow square at the southeast, he drew a red lotus of eight petals, with a yellow corolla. In the midst of this lotus, he inscribed the letter **ha**, with the bindu. In the south western square also he drew the lotus and inscribed the third suspirant within with the sixth vowel and the fourteenth, **AU** and **M**, decorated with the Naadabindu.*

The leaves of the lotus he carefully painted red, the background was black. With six bindus, he drew a hexagram in black in the east. He drew triangles in different colours and a crescent moon in the west, in yellow. He entered the four bijas in their proper places. When the mystic diagram in yellow, red, black, blue and white was complete, the sannyasin restrained his mind and worshipped the rising sun.

*

Like any rishi, Arjuna stood on one foot in the heart of the Dvaita vana, with one eye fixed on the sun, chanting the five-syllabled Siva mantra, **Namah Sivayah**. So impeccable was his tapasya the devas themselves went to Siva and begged him to grant Arjuna what he wanted. This was a weapon to use against the Kauravas, the evil Duryodhana and his brothers. Most of all, Arjuna needed an astra to kill Jayadratha, whose father had a boon that his son could be killed only with the greatest of all astras. Siva assured the devas he meant to help Arjuna, since his cause was just.

Suddenly, sent by Duryodhana who had truck with such demons, the asura Muka stormed into that jungle as an immense wild boar. Like a tornado came Mukasura, uprooting old trees with his tusks. Just then, Siva himself appeared there as a Kirata, a hunter and his ganas as Bhilla tribals.

The boar saw Arjuna and charged him. At the same instant, Arjuna and the Kirata loosed arrows at the beast. The hunter's arrow pierced the great pig's rear, came out through its snout and burrowed down into the earth. From the other side, Arjuna's arrow flashed in at the snout, came out through the boar's back and lay bloody on the ground. Muka fell dead and resumed his natural, monstrous form.

The Kirata sent one of his tribesmen to fetch his arrow. Arjuna also arrived beside the dead demon to retrieve his missile. Arjuna picked up his shaft before Siva's gana. The Bhilla said, "Rishi, give back my arrow."

Arjuna had not seen the Kirata shoot at the boar and retorted, "I shot the daitya. Can't you see the arrow has my name engraved on it? Do you think you will get it from me just for the asking?"

The gana laughed. "You are no sage, but a liar. The arrow is my master's. He saved your life and you steal from him? Your tapasya will be ruined if you steal."

My master waits with our hunters. He can bless you or kill you, as he pleases. If you are so keen to have an arrow, Rishi, come and meet him. He has many arrows like this one and some better."

Arjuna said, "You are true to your nature, forester and to your low birth. I am a kshatriya while you are a thief. Your master is also just a hunter. How can he hope to fight me? If you beg me for this arrow, I may give it to you. Otherwise, let your master come and beg to fight me."

His face darkening, the tribal said, "You are no sage, but a fool that courts his death! Give me the arrow and go peacefully with your life."

Arjuna snarled, "Bhilla, a fight between a lion and a jackal is always unequal. Go and send your master to me. I hope he is less of a jackal than you are."

The Bhilla went back to his master and told him what had happened. Laughing, the Kirata came towards Arjuna with his army of hunters. Calmly, Arjuna stood his ground. The wild man shouted from some way off, "Your brothers are in distress, your wife is grief-stricken: why do you court death? How will you recover your kingdom if you die? Give my arrow back to me and go in peace."

Arjuna lost his temper altogether. He roared back at this forester who knew too much, "The lion never fears the jackal pack. Come and fight!"

The tribe of hunters attacked Arjuna. He shot them down swiftly, splitting their bows with a tremendous volley of light-like arrows. Grinning stain toothed, the black, ash-smeared Kirata came to face the Pandava warrior. A scathing duel broke out and Arjuna was amazed by the wild man's prowess. Then, in an eyeflash, the Kirata shot Arjuna's bow out of his hands; he shot his armour off his body, leaving him naked. Arjuna ran at him, dived low and, seizing the hunter's feet, hefted him high and whirled him, queerly unresisting, above his head. The puzzled Arjuna looked up and saw Siva above him.

Arjuna laughed: ecstatically, like a child. He prostrated himself before Siva. He cried, "You deceived me, Lord. Oh, curse me that I fought you!"

Siva raised him up tenderly, "You have worshipped me, my fine bhakta, as you know best, with arrows and fists. I am glad! Ask for any boon, it shall be yours."

Overwhelmed, tears streaming down his face, Arjuna said, "Devadeva, obeisance! Obeisance, Kailasapati, Sadasiva, Sadyojata,

Nilakanta. Obeisance, Kapalin, with the garland of bones. I bow to you, camphor-bodied Pinakin, Vyalin, O Nirguna, Saguna Siva. Lord, I am your slave and you are my master."

Siva said, "Choose your boon, my son, your time is short."

Arjuna said, "It is a worldly siddhi for which I did tapasya: to save my family from our enemies."

Knowing what was in his heart, Siva gave Arjuna the Paasupatastra: profound and inexorable weapon. He said, "This is my own astra. Win back your kingdom with my power."

Siva and his ganas vanished and Arjuna returned to his family, with the weapon of their destiny in his quiver. How excited they were when he told them what had happened. How many times they made him repeat his tale, savouring it like amrita, especially the part when the Lord stood revealed before their brother.

TWELVE JYOTIRLINGAS

FIFTEEN

Hatesa

*The sannyasin spread a tiger-skin to the south of the mystic diagram. He chanted the Astra mantra, sprinkling pure water over the striped hide. **AUM Sivayah Namah!** He chanted and sat on the tiger-skin, facing north. He filled the conch shell with sacral water and gently set down it on the yantra. He said Pranava seven times, while offering flowers around the shell. With his right hand, he made the dhenu mudra and the sankha mudra. He sprinkled the pavitra jala everywhere.*

*He said the Surya mantra and called the names of the rishis. He worshipped Kaalagnirudra, Adhara Shakti, Ananta, Prithvi, Ratnadvipa, the devas of knowledge, detachment and supremacy. Beginning with the eastern quarter, he adored the Gods of Evil, the lower lid of maaya and the upper lid of vidya, sattva, rajas and tamas. Slowly, he raised the Shakti through the path of the Sun, through the pingala nadi. He made it emerge with a handful of flowers. For Siva, red as vermillion, who is Ardhanaari, who bears the mace Khatvanga, the sannyasin uttered Pranava first, **AUM**, then **Hraam, Hriim and Sah.***

He worshipped the Sun and the six organs in the petals of the mystic lotus. Aditya, Bhaskara, Bhanu and Ravi he worshipped, Akra, Brahma, Vishnu and Rudra. He worshipped the Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn and Rahu, the seven oceans, the seven Gangas, the maharishis, the devas, the gandharvas, the nagas, apsaras, yakshas, the Vedas. He set the arghya vessel with holy water in it before him and blessed it with flowers and perfumes; he raised it to the point between his eyebrows. He hymned Surya, "Obeisance to you, vermillion-hued, O diamond-adorned. Be pleased to accept this arghya, my offering."

*He worshipped Siva; he worshipped Durga and Kshetrapala. He recited the Apsarapantu, to keep asuras away: "**Apsarapantu Bhutani Sarvatodisham. Sarvesam Virodhan Samarabhe. Apsarapantu. Apahata Asura Rakshamsi Vedipadah. AUM Astrayah Phat!**"*

Thrice he clapped his hands; thrice he kicked his feet to clear his way. He controlled his breath, he recited the Hamsa mantra silently;

through the Brahma nadi he brought the living consciousness into his heart. Slowly, he raised the chita from the muladhaara, up his spine, to the cerebral cortex. His body was drenched in the sublime, ambrosiac current flowing from the lunar zone of the chita. Within the lotus of the thousand petals, within the twelve, his body thrilled to the taintless ecstasy of the sattvic current; it was a profound thing now. Knowing Tat Tvam Asi, the ultimate union, he brought the atman down gently into the lotus of his heart. He thrust the atman into the Atman, through the current of nectar; piously, he made the vital breath stable. Thinking of Siva, he dedicated himself in quietude.

*The sage of Pranava was Brahma, the meter was Gayatri and the Deity was the great Atman: Sadasiva who is the I, the Self. **A** was the seed, **U** was the Shakti and **M** the Kaalika. Pranava was the way of moksha.*

*

The three worlds, of the devas, the asuras and human beings, are pervaded by Siva in the form of sacred phalluses; these are innumerable. *Indeed, the Universe has the form of a linga!* Everything that exists is in Siva's image; yet, the main Jyotirlingas on earth are twelve: where Siva himself incarnated at one time or other, then remained as a holy linga to bless the world.

Just hearing about these lingas of grace rids a man of his sins. They are Somanatha, Mallikarjuna, Mahakaala, Parameswara, Kedara, BhimaSankara, Visvesa, Tryambaka, Vaidyanatha, Nagesa, Ramesa and Ghusmesa. Those who repeat these names daily achieve their every desire; and those who chant them with no trace of desire are released forever from birth and rebirth.

When eaten, the prasada offered to these Jyotirlingas makes ashes of the sins of a thousand births. The mere sight of a Jyotirlinga can cause moksha; but these lingas were not always upon the earth.

Once, long ago, his bhaktas the rishis worshipped Siva incessantly within the daruvana, the cedar forest. Their devotions were so intense, that Siva decided to visit them. One day, leaving their women behind, the learned brahmanas went deep into the vana to gather dry twigs and branches for their sacrificial fire. Siva chose that hour to visit their

settlement. He came in a misshapen form, his twisted and brilliant body red and blue: naked he went, ash clad. Siva came holding his penis in his hand; he drew its foreskin back and forth. He waved his organ about, grinding his hips in a surreal dance, crooning to himself all the while, it seemed in irreparable sorrow.

The rishis' wives were overcome, first with fear, then quickly with a frenetic excitement that they could not understand or contain. In a throng, they accosted that weird person. Their soft hands moved in fever over his crooked body, mad to touch him. They stroked his hand; in awe and delight, they fondled his marvellous phallus. Soon they were rivals, each one trying to be nearest him, out of their wits with love for the wild stranger. He never said a word, but continued the rhythmic gyrations of his pelvis: mystic and unfathomable lewdness.

The rishis returned and found their wives with the vulgar stranger. They cried, "Who is this? What is this?"

Siva only swayed his hips bizarrely and fondled himself; he spoke no word. In fear of their husbands, the women shrank away from him. The eldest rishi cried, "Disgusting wretch, defiler of the Vedas, may your phallus fall off!"

At the curse, Siva's tumid linga dropped out of his hand and fell to the earth. Blazing cosmic fire, it plunged through the ground. That linga began to burn everything in its path. It burnt the earth, it burnt heaven; plunging into the under-worlds, it burnt the patalas. High and low, it blazed; nowhere did the terrible phallus rest and soon no calm place remained in creation. The rishis were panic-stricken; the devas had no peace. They flew to Brahma and told him what had happened.

Brahma said, "Brahmanas, what a foolish thing you have done. As long as Siva's linga ranges the worlds there will be no peace anywhere."

The rishis and the devas cried, "How can we make the blazing thing still?"

Brahma pondered a moment; then he said gravely, "Worship Uma: only she can make Siva's organ quiet. Place a jar of water from a holy tirtha on an eight-petalled yantra, with sprouts of barley and durva grass. Cast a spell on the jar with mantras from the Veda. Drench the wild linga with the water from the sacred jar, chanting the Satarudriya as you do."

When this was done, the devas and rishis saw the mighty linga materialise before them beside the Goddess' yantra. It was quiet for the

time, but throbbed as if it would take flight again any moment. They lifted the linga onto the pedestal that was the mountain girl's yoni, her sacred vulva and vagina. Along with an auspicious arrow, they installed it there. Again, they chanted Vedic hymns; they worshipped Siva with offerings of food, perfumes, sandal, flowers and incense, with music and prostrations. They chanted svastyana mantras; the rishis cried, "Jaya! Jaya! O Siva, be still and protect the worlds."

Siva grew quiescent within Parvati, who ecstatically assumed the form of the cosmic yoni. He came incandescent before those rishis and said, "Only the mountain daughter can bear my linga within her body. Now there shall be peace and fruitfulness: let the worlds prosper."

That first phallus, the original linga that fell out of Siva's hand, is renowned across the three worlds as Hataksema, Hatesa or Siva-Siva. Where the Hatesa is worshipped, there is joy in this life and moksha hereafter.

SIXTEEN

Somalinga

The sannyasin sat to the right of the mystic yantra; he worshipped it with AUM. He meditated on the Guru, saying, "AUM Gum Gurubhyah Namah!"

He worshipped Ganapati with incense and flowers, seating him on the lotus to the southwest of the diagram. He invoked Ganesa. He saw him red and mammoth-bodied, with the perfect elephant's face, holding a noose, a goad and giving boons. He offered him naivedya: plantains, coconuts, mangoes and sweet jaggery balls.

In the northwest, he conceived Skanda's form. He chanted the Skandagayatri and thought deeply on Kumara: like a sun, peacock-mounted, four-armed, magnificent, with a spear and a cockerel, crowned and his hands raised in the mudras of granting protection and boons. He worshipped him with incense and mantras.

He worshipped Nandin, chief of the harem, in the right wing of the eastern doors: Nandin with the lustre of the golden hill, wearing luminous ornaments, the crescent moon his crown, gentle, three-eyed, four-armed, wielding a trident, with a hind, an axe and a golden staff. To the north, he worshipped Suyasa, the Maruts' daughter, Nandiswara's consort.

*He sprinkled the yantra with water from the conch shell. On the ground, he saw holy Adhara Shakti, blue as a dark lotus. Before her, with five unfurled hoods licking the sky, he saw Vasuki. Above this, he conceived the throne of dignity with the lion's four feet, virtue, knowledge, detachment and prosperity, coloured white, yellow, red and dark blue. He conceived adharma and the evils, from east to north. He conceived the eight siddhis in the petals, the Shaktis in the filaments, vairagya in the corolla, the nine Shaktis in the seeds, Siva's dharma in the bulb of the root, the Saivic gyana in the stem and the zones of Agni, Surya and Soma above the crown. Above this, he saw the throne of the Deity, resplendent with the Lord Pravyomavakasa. Travelling upwards in spirit from the Adhara Shakti to the throne of Siva, the ascetic chanted **AUM Sivayah Namah**. He invoked the Lord, standing with a handful of flowers.*

He meditated on the Lord in Omkara: pure as crystal, pervasive, incomprehensible even to Brahma, Vishnu, Indra and Rudra, essence of the Vedas, without beginning, middle, or end: Mahaushadhi, panacea for every sickness. He meditated with obeisance upon Siva, Sakaala and Nishkaala, of time and timeless. He conceived him, transparent-bodied, cool, crystalline, with a moon crown and thick jata, his eastern face bright as the rising sun, with three lotus eyes, his western face blue as a cloud, terrible with fangs and out-thrust throbbing lips, with three round and red eyes. The northern face is red as coral, blue-haired, with three long, graceful eyes. The southern face has the lambency of the full moon: tender, three-eyed, smiling. The fifth face is the gentlest of all and the most softly radiant, with three eyes shining out fondly.

In his right hands, Siva holds the trident, the axe Khatvanga, the thunderbolt, a sword and blinding fire. In his left hands, he has the bow Pinaka, an arrow, a bell, a noose and a goad. The Nivritti kala is up to his knees, the Pratishta kala up to his navel, the Vidya kala up to his neck, the Shanta kala to his brow and the Shantyatita kala is beyond that. Thus, with his body of five kalas, the transcendent arts, he pervades the five paths. He has Isana for his crown, the primal lord Purusha. He has Aghora for his heart, Vamadeva his genitals, Sadyojata his form. He is the same as the Omkara, the five- and six-syllabled sacred mantras, the six mountains and the jatis.

Now, the sannyasin conceived of the Goddess, Siva's consort, as Manomani, on the Lord's left side. He chanted Pranava and then the mantra Gaurimimaaya; he prostrated himself in front of the Devi. She had the sheen of a lotus in bloom, huge eyes set wide apart, dark and curly hair, blue, round and high breasts, plump buttocks, smooth and protuberant and she was clad in fine yellow silk. On her forehead was a tilaka and many-coloured flowers were in her braided hair. Her face was bent in bashfulness; a golden, thousand-petalled lotus was in her hand: symbol of the soul.

*He said, "**Bhave Bhave Natibhave!**" offering padya; "**Vaamaya Namah!**" offering water for achamana; "**Jyeshtaya Namah!**" offering a fresh cloth; "**Shreshtaya Namah!**" offering the sacred thread; "**Rudrayah Namah!**" offering water again; "**Kaalayah Namah!**" offering perfumes to Siva and Parvati. He then began the avarana puja.*

*

Daksha gave his twenty-seven daughters, Aswini and the others, in marriage to Soma the Moon. How radiant they were when they had one another. How bright the Nakshatras were now, how much more brilliant was the Moon: as the jewel set in gold is more resplendent; as the gold in which the jewel is set is more golden.

But of his twenty-seven wives, Soma loved none as he did Rohini. The others complained to their father that they were neglected. Daksha came to the Moon and said, "How can you make such a difference between one of your wives and the rest? You must stop this, or you will find hell for yourself."

Soma fell at his father-in-law's feet and begged forgiveness. He swore that never again would he make the slightest difference between his wives; satisfied, Daksha returned home. How does someone fated to court disaster suddenly befriend fortune? How does even the Moon change his destiny? Nature had her way: Soma still made love only to Rohini and neglected her sisters. Again, Daksha's other daughters complained to their father and again the prajapati came to the Moon.

Daksha begged Soma to be reasonable. Again, tearfully, the Moon fell at Daksha's feet; again, he swore to treat all his wives equally. Daksha decided to give him another chance to mend his ways. Before the month was over, his twenty-six unhappy daughters sent a messenger to their father, saying their lives were still intolerable, Rohini's was the only bed in which the Moon slept.

In a towering rage, Daksha cursed Soma, "Waste with consumption!"

At once, Soma contracted the dread disease. He began to lose his lustre and fade in all his digits. The devas, the rishis, the asuras of night: everyone was miserable. Life itself, especially the life of the heart wasted away. Love wasted with the Moon; its enchantment waned. Soma's condition was quickly so wretched that it was painful even to look at him. Indra and the devas, Vasishta and the maharishis came to Brahma. With many a sigh between them, full of pity for Soma, they told him what had happened. Brahma snorted at their compassion.

Seeming quite pleased to hear about the Moon's misery, the Creator said to the devas and rishis, "Your pity is misplaced: you have forgotten

what Soma is like. Let me refresh your memories how he first came among us and what he did."

Once, the majestic rishi Atri performed an unprecedented tapasya. He stood stiff and straight as a staff, his arms raised above his head. For three thousand years of the devas, he stood in the tapasya known as Atikatora, the Most Difficult. As he stood unwinking, his semen held inside him for all those years, his body turned into Soma rasa.

The Soma welling in Atri flowed out in waves through his eyes, illumining the ten directions. The effluence impregnated the ten golden Goddesses of the directions. None of them could bear that virile life alone: so they bore it together and it shone from them like the cool-rayed moon shining down on the worlds. Those Goddesses could not bear the brilliant embryo for long and they let it fall on to the sacred earth as moonlight.

When Brahma saw illustrious Soma falling softly, he gave him his own chariot, fashioned by the devas and drawn by a thousand horses: so he could ride through the sky and give succour to the world.

Wherever Soma's power fell upon the earth, green things, plants and trees, bushes and flowering creepers sprang up. With them, he nurtured the four kinds of creatures. When he performed a fervent tapasya for a thousand lotus counts of years, Brahma gave Soma sovereignty over the seeds, the plants, the brahmanas and the waters. He became a king of kings and nourished the worlds; his glory was ineffable.

Then, he held a royal coronation for himself. Hiranyagarbha was the udgatr, Brahma was the brahmana priest and Hari was the guest. Led by Sanatkumara, all the original brahmanas were present. Soma gave those brahmanas the three worlds as dakshina. Nine Goddesses attended on him: Sini and Kuhu, the days of the new moon; Vapus, beauty; Pushti, prosperity; Prabha, splendour; Vasu, wealth; Kirti, fame; Dhriti, resolution; and Lakshmi, great fortune herself. After that fabulous crowning, Soma became vain.

He abducted guru Brihaspati's lovely wife Tara and sided with the asuras against the devas. Out of affection for Angiras, Rudra joined the fray and attacked Sukra, who had attacked Angiras on Soma's behalf, when Brihaspati came to beg Tara back. It was because of Soma's reckless pride that the first, the original, Great War, Taraka maya, was fought between the devas and the daityas; and it destroyed the world.

Brahma said, "That is what Soma did, if you have forgotten. I made peace between Siva and Sukra; I returned Tara to Brihaspati. But Tara was pregnant and, seeing her, the guru cried in anguish, 'You shall not give birth to that child.'

Tara retorted, 'I will have this child no matter what.'

In that ancient sabha, you devas, aghast, asked Tara to say if the child in her womb belonged to Soma or Brihaspati. Tara would not tell. When her son was born, he began to attack the devas like a terrible enemy. Only then, she confessed to me that Soma was the father of her child. How pleased Soma was, how proud! He set the mercurial boy up in the sky and called him Budha, not caring a whit for Brihaspati's feelings."

Brahma sighed, as over a favoured child gone astray. "One cannot count all Soma's intransigence. Now Daksha has cursed him and I suppose, for the earth's sake, we must find a cure for his consumption."

He paused ruminatively, then said, "Let the Moon go to the shrine at Prabhasa with the devas. Let him worship Siva there with the mrityunjaya homa. Only Siva can cure him."

After they mollified Daksha, the devas took Soma to Prabhasa. They invoked the holy waters of the Saraswati and the other rivers and they worshipped a parthiva linga, an earthen phallus. Having shown him his way, the devas returned to their heaven. Soma chanted the mrityunjaya mantra a hundred million times and one day Siva stood before him.

"I am pleased with you, Soma, choose your boon."

Soma prostrated before the blinding Vision; he remembered the old war over Tara that he had fought against Siva. Humbled now, he said in a low voice, "If you are pleased with me, Sankara, there is nothing I cannot have. Pardon all my sins, Lord, remain benevolent to me always. O Siva, let my body not waste from Daksha's curse."

Siva found a fine solution: "Soma, let your digit wane steadily, day by day, during one fortnight. And let it wax during the next."

When they heard, the devas and the rishis flocked to that place and fell on their faces in delight before Siva. They pleaded with him, "Mahadeva, remain here forever with Uma."

Soma sang Siva's praises as Nirguna and Saguna and, laughing indulgently, Siva stayed there as Someswara, Lord of the Moon. The devas created a sacred pool there to worship Siva and Brahma, as well, who sent

Soma to Prabhasa in the first place. It is renowned in swarga, bhumi and patala as the pool of the Moon.

A man who sees the Somalinga at Somanatha has his sins taken from him. He who bathes in the velvet waters of the Moon's pool is cured of consumption, even leprosy, even as Soma Deva was.

SEVENTEEN

Mahakaala

He worshipped the Lords Ganesa and Karttikeya where he did before.

He worshipped Ananta within the eastern petal, Sukshma in the south, Sivottama in the west, Ekanetra in the north, Ekarudra in the northeast, the Trimurti in the southeast, Srikantha in the southwest and Sikhandisa in the northwest.

He worshipped the Emperors: Vrishesana in the middle of the eastern door, Nandin to the south of it and Mahakaala to the north, Bhringisa to the west of the southern door, Vinayaka to the east of that with wild fragrances, Vrishabha in the northwest and Guha in the southern square. To the east of the northern door, he prayed to Bhava, Sarva, Isana, Rudra, Pasupati, Ugra, Bhima and Mahadeva. This was the third avartana.

*In the east, above the corolla of the lotus, he invoked Siva with the mantra, "**Yo Vedadau Svarah!**" and worshipped Siva in the eastern, Visvesa in the southern, Paramesana in the northern and Sarvesa in the western petals of the lotus. He called to Rudra invoking him with "**A Vo Rajanam**", with flowers, perfumes and incense. He worshipped Siva in the east, prayed to Hara in the south, Mrida in the north and Bhava in the petal in the western quarter. He called, "**Pra Tad Vishnu!**" and worshipped Hari in the north, Vasudeva in the east, Aniruddha in the south, Samkarshana in the north and Pradyumna in the west. Saying, "**Hiranyagarbha Samvartata!**" he worshipped Brahma in the western lotus. He invoked Hiranyagarbha in the east, Viraja in the south, Pushkara in the north and Kaala in the west.*

Then the fifth avartana: in the topmost row of squares, the Lokapalas were worshipped, beginning with the last and in the way of pradakshina. With the ten bijas, he worshipped the Lokapalas. He worshipped Brahma and Vishnu. He worshipped the trident in the northeast, the thunderbolt in the east, the axe in the southeast, the arrow in the south, the sword in the southwest, the noose in the west, the goad in the northwest and the bow in the north. He worshipped all these as

standing with palms joined reverently, their faces wreathed in brilliant smiles, looking up devotedly at Siva and Uma.

The sannyasin performed the sashtanga namaskara. He circumambulated the mystic lotus; he made an offering of flowers.

*

The Jyotirlinga Mallikarjuna is where Siva and Sivaa remained upon the Krauncha Mountain next to the Manasa Sarovara, to be near their estranged son Kumara. At the end of each fortnight, they visit him: Siva on amavasya and Parvati on the day of purnima.

The third Jyotirlinga is Mahakaala, the sight of which burns up a man's sins and can even bestow moksha: for Siva surely dwells in it.

There was a brahmana, a Vedic scholar called Vedapriya, in the beautiful city of Avanti. Vedapriya was devoted to the Lord. He kept the fire of sacrifice lit in his home and worshipped Siva austere and lovingly. The brahmana had four sons as pious as himself: Devapriya, Priyamedhas, Sukrita and Dharmavahin; by their combined bhakti, the city of Avanti was awash with grace.

Some leagues away, on the Ratnamala hills, lived Dusana, the asura. Dusana had a boon of invincibility from Brahma, but he loathed the Vedas, worship and all things sacred. Between his tireless conquests and unfailing desecration, Dusana heard of the glory of Avanti and came to the blessed city with an army of daityas.

Mad Dusana called four of his savagest demons and said, "I have vanquished the devas and the most powerful kings of the earth. Yet, this puny family of brahmanas defies me. Go and tell them Dusana says they must give up either the worship of Siva or their lives."

Led by those four asura commanders, like the fires of the Dissolution, Dusana's army laid siege to peaceful Avanti. Not when the demon forces stormed its streets, did the brahmana family stir from its quiet devotions. The asuras slaughtered the men of that city; they raped its women. The people came in panic to Vedapriya, crying, "If you don't stop your worship we will all perish today."

Vedapriya said, "We have no army to protect us anyway, only Siva. He will watch over us."

The brahmana and his sons sat on before the earthen linga they worshipped with Siva's thousand names. Dusana rode up; he saw them defying him. He screamed, "Bind them, drag them, kill them!"

Vedapriya and his sons were so absorbed they did not hear the demon's cry. Howling, Dusana rushed into the sanctum. He raised his sword to hew off Vedapriya's head, when the ground beside the parthiva linga caved in with an echoing report, to reveal a chasm. From that crevasse, Mahakaala stood forth: tall as the stars, more terrible than imagination, blood dripping from his fangs, growling low and louder than thunder. "I am Time and Death come to finish you!"

As the sun dispels darkness, with just a humkara, long hum from his hideous lips, Mahakaala made ashes of Dusana and his army. Vedapriya and his sons stood, with their heads bowed before the awesome Vision. The old brahmana said, "Siva, stay forever in this place to protect your bhaktas."

Mahakaala dwindled in blessing: he sank back not into the chasm but the earthen linga, where he remains. They say the yonic pedestal of earth for this linga's support extends for three yojanas in every direction and if a man sees this icon, evil does not approach him even in his dreams.

When, generations later, the Sivabhakta Chandrasena became king of Avanti, now called Ujjain, the great chief of ganas, Manibhadra, gave him the precious Chintamani, bright as the Kaustubha. The jewel was a philosopher's stone and turned copper, brass, tin, even common rocks, into gold. Chandrasena wore it round his neck and nothing would induce him to part with it, not for a day, for a moment. The covetous kings of the earth did their utmost to have that stone from him: in vain.

Those kings conspired, brought a combined army to the gates of Ujjain and laid siege to it. When Chandrasena saw the vast army at his gates, he went to Mahakaaleswara within his city, to worship Siva who was his only refuge now. Without sleep or food, Chandrasena worshipped Hara in the parthiva linga of old.

A widowed cowherdess, her five-year-old boy with enormous black eyes on her hip, wandered into Mahakaaleswara from her gypsy camp on the outskirts of Avanti. The woman stood watching the king at his prayer. She stood for an hour, then bowed to the God of the linga and returned to her camp.

Back in the settlement, her son found a smooth long pebble and installing it as his own Siva linga, began to imitate Chandrasena's worship. Stones and twigs were his jewels and incense, a little mound of earth was his lamp; leaves and flowers became sacred cloths and bits of grass the rice grains for his ritual. The child danced for Siva and prostrated himself, repeatedly, as he had seen the king do.

His mother called out to him from her hut, to come to eat. The boy was so absorbed he did not hear her. After calling a few times and receiving no response, she strode angrily over to what she thought was his nonsensical game. She found her little one entranced before his pebble linga. Even when she called his name from a few feet away, he did not answer. With a cry, she dragged him up and began to beat him. Still, his eyes remained shut; when she let him down again, he walked straight back to the linga, as in a dream. Losing control, his mother kicked away the pebble, the small stones and leaves of worship and stamped back to her hut.

The child fell on the ground and sobbed; he fainted in a paroxysm of grief at losing his temple. When he awoke, he found himself on the floor of a magnificent shrine, which that gypsy camp had become. The doorway was solid gold; huge blue diamonds encrusted a bright dais within; jewelled columns of unearthly craftsmanship supported the gold-domed ceiling and the floors were paved with slabs of transparent crystal. At the heart of the temple was a great and wonderful linga of rock, glowing with unearthly gems.

The boy saw the gypsies' humble kutilas had become fine mansions. He toddled into his mother's suddenly resplendent home and found her asleep: now she was an apsara-like beauty. She lay on a silver bed, wearing divine clothes and ornaments. Excitedly, he shook her awake and told her about Siva's blessing. She gazed at the transformation around her, doubting that she had woken at all.

The cowherdess sent word of the miracle to the pious Chandrasena at his worship. The king came running to the place and he knew Siva had blessed Avanti again. In the midst of a siege by envious enemies, Ujjain marked the night with frenzied celebrations, which seemed to last an eyeflash and forever.

Camped outside the city gates, the besieging kings heard about the miracle. They called an anxious conference and, chastened by the tale of

the boy Siva blessed, decided that attacking Chandrasena would be foolhardy. They sent a messenger to the king, hoping he would forge an alliance with them. He responded graciously and welcomed them into his city. He took them to the gopa boy's golden shrine.

Those kings made that boy chief of all cowherds throughout their lands; as they sat praying in his temple, dazzling Hanuman appeared in their midst! Blessing them and the city of Mahakaaleswara, the Vanara God prophesied, "In the eight generation of the family of this boy of wonder, Vishnu himself shall be born as Krishna: dark saviour of the world. Let this child Srikara's name be a legend in the world and he will find moksha at the end of his life."

Those who hear the story of Mahakaala, Chandrasena and Srikara truly become bhaktas of Siva, ocean of mercy.

EIGHTEEN

Parameswara, Kedareshwara, Bhimeswara

In a tide of creation, Brahma poured forth his creatures; but they were barren and did not multiply. Brahma was distraught. A heavenly voice spoke to him, "Make a creation born from coupling."

There were no women in creation yet, only sons: how could there be copulation? Brahma knew he needed Siva's help. The Lotus-born One performed a tapasya to Siva, who is always conjoined with Shakti. Assuming the wish-yielding form of Isana, Siva appeared before Brahma as an Ardhanaariswara: half God and half Goddess, the Cosmic Androgyne.

Palms joined, Brahma hymned that apparition. In his magnificent voice, both male and female, as rumbling clouds, Sambhu the Ardhanaariswara said, "Brahma, I grant your wish."

In a thunderclap and for the first time ever, Siva and Shakti stood apart before Brahma, two distinct beings: one male, the other female. Brahma lay on his face before great Shakti. He said to her, "In the Beginning, your Lord emitted me and commanded me create. From my mind, I made the creatures; but they do not flourish, nor reproduce. So I have to create them over and over. I want to make a creation that multiplies by coition. The race of women is not yet born and I have no power to begin it myself. I beg you, Devi, origin of all Shaktis, give me the supreme Shakti that is the mother of every other.

Glory to you, Sivaa. Grant me the power create the race of women. And one more boon, O Mother of the world, hallowed because you are its source: when Siva is born on earth as Rudra, you be born as Daksha's daughter!"

From between her brows, the Goddess extruded a single Shakti, whose lustre was like her own. When Hara saw that splendorous being, he said to her, smiling, "You are pleased with Brahma's tapasya, Devi, grant him his desire."

With just a nod, the awesome Goddess agreed to be born as Daksha's daughter. Having given Brahma the power to create the race of women,

Sivaa re-entered Siva's body and the Ardhanaariswara vanished. From that time, the female sex became part of creation, which then on perpetuated itself by copulation between male and female.

*

Once, peripatetic Narada muni worshipped the Gokarna linga and then came to Vindhya, the august mountain. The mountain honoured him; and when they sat together, Vindhya said smugly to the maharishi, "Narada, I am so content: everything abides in me, nothing is missing."

Narada sighed sympathetically, but made no other reply. Vindhya asked sharply, "Why do you sigh, Rishi?"

Narada said slowly, "It is true everything abides in you, Vindhya, but Meru is loftier. He is counted among the devas, but not you."

Vindhya had no answer to this and knowing he had sown a deep seed, Narada said it was time for him to be on his endless way again. Long after the rishi left, his words rankled in the mountain's heart; until he could bear it no more and decided to worship Siva. Before an earthen idol, Vindhya sat in a fine tapasya for six months and Siva came before him, glorious.

Siva said, "Ask me for a boon, Vindhya."

Vindhya replied, "Siva, give me an intellect lofty enough to achieve whatever I want."

Siva was dismayed; he knew the arrogant mountain would abuse his blessing. Yet, having asked Vindhya to name his boon, he could not break his word. He said, "The boon is yours, do as you please with it."

Siva was about to vanish, when a host of devas and munis appeared there, Narada among them. They implored the Lord, "Stay in this place, Siva, for the weal of us all."

Caught unprepared, Vindhya echoed their sentiment. Siva stays there, as the Jyotirlinga Parameswara; and that mountain dare not exceed himself with the Lord so near him.

Listen to the greatness of the Jyotirlinga Kedareswara.

Nara and Narayana, the twin incarnations of Vishnu, performed a tapasya in Bharata Khanda, in Badarikasrama. Once Siva came to them and said, "Any boon you want shall be yours, O my spiritual sons."

Thinking of the welfare of the worlds, they said, "Remain here, Siva, to bless the earth."

Siva stayed in Kedara on Himavan as a Jyotirlinga. As Kedareshwara, he is worshipped alongside Nara and Narayana in Badarikasrama. *Though he is lord of the universe, Siva is particularly the Lord of Bharatavarsha!* Bhaktas of Kedareshwara who die on their pilgrimage are never reborn; so, also, those fortunate enough to reach that shrine and drink the sacred water there.

Hear the greatness of Jyotirlinga Bhimeswara, hearing which a man obtains whatever he wants.

Rama killed Kumbhakarna. The savage Rakshasa Bhima, who was Kumbhakarna and the rakshasi Karkati's son, lived with his mother on the Sahya Mountain, source of the Kaveri, the Krishna and the Nirvindhya. When Bhimarakshasa was still a boy, one day he asked Karkati, "Who is my father? Why do you live alone? Tell me the truth, mother, I want to know everything."

The rakshasi said wistfully, "My husband was Viradha whom Rama killed. I was childless and lived with my parents, Krikata and Pushkasi and they were burnt alive by Agastya's sishya. However, Viradha was not your father. Once, Ravana of Lanka's brother, Kumbhakarna, came to this forest. He saw me alone and forced himself on me there. He left me after taking his pleasure and went back to Lanka. Rama killed him, also. Bhima, you are Kumbhakarna's son. Oh, though he was cruel, I will never forget how magnificent that Rakshasa was!"

Bhima thought, "It was Vishnu, as Rama, that killed my father. I will have revenge on him. I will make my mother the happiest rakshasi in the world."

Bhimarakshasa performed a tapasya in Brahma's name. He stood on one foot, staring unwinkingly at the sun; until a fiery light blazed up from his head and, scorched by it, the devas fled to Brahma. Indra cried, "Pitama, the Rakshasa's tapasya sears the worlds. Grant his boon before he consumes us with his fire."

Four-faced and splendid, Brahma appeared before Bhima. "I am delighted with your tapasya. Name the boon you want."

Bhima bowed low to the lotus-seated God, "Brahma, give me unequalled strength."

Brahma said, "I do," and vanished.

The Rakshasa ran back to his home in the forest. He hugged his mother in joy and told her about Brahma's boon. Then, Bhima the fatherless rakshasa went forth to subdue the earth. First, he went to Kamarupa to make war on king Sudakshina, who was a Sivabhakta. With his incomparable strength, Bhima easily vanquished Sudakshina. He bound the king and his queen in fetters, humiliated them and shut them in a tiny subterranean cell.

In his cramped prison, Sudakshina accepted his incarceration as a Godsent time for prayer. He moulded a parthiva Siva linga and worshipped it, invoking the holy waters of the Ganga with mystic asanas and mudras. The kshatriya and his wife offered themselves to Siva, incessantly chanting the six-syllabled Siva mantra, **AUM Namah Sivayah**.

Meanwhile, Bhima continued his conquest of the quarters. He gathered an army of rakshasas and he did subdue the corners of the earth. He desecrated every holy ritual throughout his domain: as all demons do, he abhorred any kind of worship.

When Vishnu, Indra or any deva tried to stop Bhima from defiling a holy place, the invincible Rakshasa routed them in battle. With no worship left in it, darkness mantled the world. Finally, on the banks of the Mahakosi, the devas and the rishis made an earthen linga and worshipped Siva.

Siva came to them, "Vishnu, Indra, Devas, Mahamunis, what would you have of me?"

The devas and the rishis said, "The death of Bhimarakshasa."

Siva said, "So be it," and vanished.

There was, of course, still worship in the lightless world. In Kamarupa, in the little dungeon below ground, Sudakshina and his wife Dakshina prayed fervently to Siva before the simple phallic icon that Sudakshina had made on the rough floor. Finally, someone whispered in Bhima's ear, "Sudakshina is casting spells on you."

Bhima seized a sword and rushed down to the cell. He saw the parthiva linga there and howled, "What is that? Evil Kshatriya, what spell do you cast on me? Tell me the truth and I will spare your life."

Sudakshina said honestly, "I am worshipping Siva."

Bhima laughed. "Siva! Why, my uncle Ravana kept Siva as his servant. If I see any part of this Siva of yours, I will lay hands on him and

he will suffer. Get rid of the rubbish on the floor."

Sudakshina said quietly, "I will never forsake Siva and he will always protect me."

The Rakshasa roared with laughter. "That drunkard, that beggar, that yogin! What does he know of protection? Is it because he protects you that you are here in my prison?"

But Sudakshina would not raze the linga. With a growl, Bhima hurled his sword at the earthen phallus and Siva stood forth from it. An earth-shaking battle broke out between the Rakshasa with Brahma's boon and Rudra and between Siva's ganas and Bhimasura's fell legions. The heavens trembled; it seemed the mountains may fall into the sea and the ocean into the sky: so ferocious was that war that spread like fire over the earth. Narada arrived there, hands folded to Siva.

"Lord, why use a sword to split a blade of grass? Rudra, the worlds quake in fear."

Siva began a long humkara. In moments, that sound reduced all Bhima's rakshasas to ashes. The ashes of that Demon himself could not even be found. The fire of Siva's fury flashed from hill to forest and on; wind-borne, the rakshasas' ashes flew with it. Those ashes are magical: sorcerers use them to change their forms and faces; evil spirits are kept away with those demons' ashes.

When darkness lifted from the earth, the devas and rishis implored Siva, "Stay on here, Lord."

Siva stays in Kamarupa, in the faithful Sudakshina's kingdom as the Jyotirlinga BhimaSankara, the peerless protector.

NINETEEN

Avimukteswara

Once, mysteriously, the three worlds began to quake as if caught in a cosmic storm. The devas panicked; they flew to Vishnu in Vaikunta and asked him why everything trembled. Hari said, "Let us go to Siva. He will know why the worlds are shaking."

Led by Vishnu and Indra, the devas set out for Mount Mandara. When they arrived, they were enveloped in an impenetrable darkness, a night of the spirit. The mountain seemed deserted. They saw neither Siva nor Parvati, not even Nandin. When Narayana saw the devas' eyes clouded with maaya's blindness, he said, "Don't you see Siva standing before you? Why don't you worship him?"

The devas cried, "We do not see Uma's Lord. We are blinded and we do not know by whom or why."

Vishnu said, "Devas, you sinned against Siva. You killed his wife Mridani's child and he has taken your discrimination and vision from you. You do not see him though he stands right before you. Go and purify yourselves with the taptakrichra. Expiate your sin by bathing and fasting where Siva dwells and you will see him again."

The devas took that vow. Chanting the Satarudriya, Siva's hundred names, they fasted, subsisting on just water, milk, ghee and air for three days each and then they bathed with a hundred and fifty jars of milk, on the holy mountain in the freezing cold. Their stain of sin was washed away.

They said to Vasudeva, "Vishnu, tell us where to find Sambhu. Jagannatha, we want to bathe him with milk."

Vishnu opened his breast and the devas gasped when they saw, lying on the lotus of his heart, Siva's living linga!

They bathed that linga with milk; they smeared it with fragrant yellow sandal and made offerings of bilva leaves and lotuses. Calling out Siva's thousand and eight names, the Kotirudra, they wondered how Hari and Iswara could be one, since they were born separately from Sattva and Tamas.

As they were musing thus, Hari suddenly stood revealed before them, in his awesome Viswarupa, lofty as the sky, brilliant as suns. He was both Protector and Destroyer: he was Hari-Hara. Three-eyed he was, wearing earrings of lotuses and serpents and a topknot of jata. His banner bore both the eagle and the bull; his body was covered by both yellow silk and antelope hide. He carried chakra and pinaka, trisula and ajagava, a skull and a bell, a plough and a bow; and he shook the sky with a blast on his conch, the panchajanya.

The devas fell on their faces to worship that Vision.

*

Listen to the greatness of Visveswara.

That which was First, an entity of knowledge and bliss, desired another, a second. That second, born from the tree of nirvana, was possessed of attributes: it was called Siva. Siva split itself in two, male and female, Siva and Shakti. Thus, the unseen and primal chita and ananda created Purusha and Prakriti. When they saw their ineffable parents, Prakriti and Purusha were tormented by doubt. A voice spoke from the formless Atman, saying, "You shall perform tapasya for the sake of perfect creation."

Prakriti and Purusha said, "Siva, where shall we sit in tapasya?"

Siva created an exquisite city in the firmament near the Purusha. Here, Vishnu sat in dhyana for a long, long time. From his tapasya, pristine waters began to flow. These currents pervaded Sunya, the void; nothing else was to be seen. Seeing the waters, Vishnu thought, "What is this miracle?"

At that instant, a mysterious jewel fell before him from the Lord Siva's ear: holy Manikarnika. Swelling, transmuting, Manikarnika became five krosas long and wide; it floated on the waters of the beginning and Siva supported it on his trisula. Vishnu slept there: blue Narayana with his consort Prakriti. A lotus sprouted from his navel and Brahma was born in it. Within a golden egg, Brahma created the fourteen dimensions, all the mandalas.

Siva thought, "How will the beings born from the golden egg attain me? They are bound by karma."

He released Manikarnika, Kasi of panchakrosa: from his trisula into the mortal world.

"Kasi will be the bestower of liberation in the world. It will be the destroyer of sins, the illuminator of moksha. This shall be the place of my uttermost mystery, greater than any knowledge."

Kasi is so named because it roots out karma from even the greatest sinner. Siva himself installed the pristine Jyotirlinga at Kasi, the unfathomable Avimukta: Visveswara, Lord of the universe.

Of the four mokshas: Salokya, in the same heaven with him; Samipya, nearness to him; Sarupya, assimilation into him; and Sayujya, utter absorption into Brahman: the last can only be attained in Kasi. Even the devas want to die in Kasi: for anyone who dies here, whether pure or a sinner, is surely liberated. It does not matter if they are bhaktas or not, if they are human, animal, bird or insect, tree or plant. Those that die in Kasi are reborn in Sivaloka, bull-mounted, with the crescent moon on their heads and infinite peace in their hearts.

A man dying in Kasi should crush his own feet to be certain he finds his end in Varanasi. For this is the city of Siva's grace: Siva who is the Lord of Kailasa, tamasic without, sattvic within, who is known as Kaalagni, fire of time.

Karma once done is never wasted in a crore of kalpas and one must enjoy or suffer the fruit of every deed. Evil karma gets one to hell, karma that is only good, to heaven. Mixed karma results in a human birth and the birth is good or evil according to the proportion of the mixture.

Of three kinds is karma: Sanchita, stored; Kriyamana, of this birth; and Prarabdha, which has already begun to yield fruit. Only in Kasi, Siva's city, can all three kinds of karma be made ashes. But Kasi is difficult of access.

Avimukta is supreme wisdom. Avimukta is Reality. Avimukta is matchless wellbeing. When the Ganga, which flows through swarga, bhumi and patala, flows through Avimukta in particular, she destroys the sins of a hundred lives for those that bathe in her. Avimukta is between the eyebrows, in the knot of the navel, in the heart, in the head, in the sun and also in Varanasi, city between the Varana and the Asi, where Siva's grace and Narayana's are found together, regardless of bhakti or its lack. Listen.

Once Siva stood forth, red and blue, from the primal linga of fire between warring Brahma and Mahavishnu. He stood forth as Nilalohita, the blue-blooded One, three-eyed, with a trident of light and a sword of flames in his hands, a serpent and the crescent moon his ornaments. Some say that, deluded by his own vanity, Brahma said arrogantly to that Apparition, "Rudra, I know you: you once sprang from my breath and you howled. Fear nothing, my naked and tamasic child."

At which, Siva created terrible Bhairava from himself, Kaalaraja with the body of flames. Bhairava roared like the end of time. With his fingernails, he plucked off Brahma's fifth head with the coarse and lying mouth. Like cold fire, the skull fell into Bhairava's left hand and stuck fast there. In terror, Vishnu began to worship Siva with the Satarudriya japa and wailing in shock from time to time, Brahma also chanted those names feverishly. Mollified, Siva granted them his protection. He said to Bhairava, "You shall honour Vishnu. As penance for your sin of plucking off Brahma's head, you will roam the worlds, begging alms. Brahma's skull will be your begging bowl: Kapalin you shall be."

Siva created a virgin of flames, Brahmahatya with a burning body and terrible claws and fangs, his sin embodied: to pursue Bhairava. He cried to Brahmahatya, "You will torment the Kapalin until he reaches the holy city of Kasi."

Relentlessly, Brahmahatya chased Bhairava. Bhairava assumed a twisted body, still radiant and pure. Crowned with a mass of jata, surrounded by proud, shining pramathas, he ranged the worlds. When women saw him, they were smitten. The best born of them, the most elegant and lovely women followed him in shameless fascination, singing and dancing in abandon. When he smiled at them, they swooned in rapture.

Cursed and pursued tirelessly by the flaming Brahmahatya, Bhairava fled to every sacred tirtha to seek expiation for his sin. He had no rest. The hellish virgin never left chasing him, plunging claw and fang into him whenever she could and the skull stuck in his palm burned him with icy fire, searing him to his marrow, his soul. He flew in vain to all the tirthas of the devas and the asuras and at last he arrived at Vaikunta, Vishnu's city.

Visvaksena, the mighty dwarapalaka, barred Bhairava's way. Bhairava sent a gana called Kaalavega to kill him. Red-eyed Visvaksena slew Kaalavega and cast the Sudarshana chakra at Bhairava himself. Bhairava ashed it with a hum and impaled Visvaksena on his trident.

Carrying the gatekeeper's body in his arms, dark Bhairava stalked into Vishnu's court, surrounded by vrishabhas and pramathas and pursued by the Brahmahatya.

When he saw Bhairava tormented, Hari split open his own head and let a river of blood as alms to fill his begging bowl. But that bowl, the skull of Brahma Paramesthin, could not be filled in a thousand cosmic years. Bhairava, whose last refuge was Vishnu, howled long and awfully, pointing to the Brahmahatya following him like a burning shadow. In his voice of ages, Vishnu commanded the fierce virgin, "Release the Shulin from the skull of Brahma!"

She would not. Vishnu said to Bhairava, "You must go to Kasi to Visveswara."

Blessing Vasudeva, Bhairava fled to Varanasi like the wind in anguish, with Visvaksena's corpse in his arms and the punishing virgin livid on his heels. The instant Bhairava set foot in that city, with a final howl the Brahmahatya plunged down into the patalas and Brahma's molten skull fell away from Bhairava's hand at the feet of the Sivaganas. Dancing for joy with Visvaksena's corpse, Kaalabhairava, fire of time, restored Vishnu's dwarapalaka to life.

Since then, Bhairava stands there at Kapalamochana in Kasi and he devours the sins of his devotees, in the place that quelled his own sin of plucking off the Pitama's head.

TWENTY

Tryambakeswara

*Siva said, "To know the meaning of Pranava is to know me. Pranava is the seed of all lore. It is small like the banyan seed, but bears within itself a mighty, eternal tree. It is the original mantra and the essence of the Vedas. I am Siva, who pervades everything; yet, I dwell only in the mantra of one syllable. In the beginning, I create the universe by saying **AUM**. Siva is Pranava and Pranava is Siva. Pranava is the vital breath of all living beings, from Brahma down.*

*The **A** of Pranava is water in the south, the **U** is the air of the north and the **M** is the fire in the middle. The maatra beyond cannot be described. It is the vanishing point, only the enlightened know it."*

*

Hear about the Jyotirlinga Tryambakeswara.

The rishi Gautama had his asrama upon the Tryambaka mountain, where the Godavari has her source. Once, by a curse of the devas, a drought of a hundred years fell on that place. Not a tender shoot pushed green life above the earth. Rishis and common folk alike deserted the Tryambaka; birds and beasts abandoned it. Holding his breath for six months, Gautama prayed to Varuna, lord of waters, to end that drought.

Rippling supernal light, Varuna came to him, "Name your boon, O holy one."

Gautama said, "Let there be rain in this thirsty place."

But Varuna replied, "Gautama, I cannot send rain against the devas' will. Ask me for any other boon and it shall be yours."

Gautama said, "Lord, you are the master of all water. You must give us some to drink."

Varuna showed Gautama an auspicious place in which to dig a trough, of a depth of a hand. As soon as the rishi had done this, the declivity filled with sweet, crystalline water. Varuna said, "Great Muni, this trough will never run dry and any sacrifice offered here, or tapasya

pursued here, will be immortal. This spring shall be known after you, O compassionate sage."

Varuna vanished. Gautama sowed seeds around that everlasting spring. In wondrous plenitude, barley, fruit trees and flowering plants sprung up in that place, sprouting at once, growing in an instant. The trough swelled slowly into a pool of fertility. Rishis arrived in the blessed grove; birds and beasts flocked back. Once destroyed by the drought, the vana grew back lush and thick around Varuna's pool. Happily, man and beast lived there for many years.

One day, Gautama's disciples came to the pool to fetch water for their guru's worship. The other rishis' wives prevented them, saying rudely, "Stand back while we draw! You can fill your pitchers after we have gone."

Gautama's disciples went and told their guru's wife, Ahalya, what had happened. Ahalya arrived at the sacred pool. The women dared not confront her, though the truth was they resented Gautama's pre-eminence.

They allowed Gautama's sishyas to draw water, but the rishis' wives returned from the pool with evil stirring their hearts. They complained to their husbands that Ahalya had been high-handed and rude. The envious rishis were easy prey to their wives' lies. They worshipped Ganapathy to redress the 'wrong' done to them. Ganesa appeared, marble white, elephant-headed and asked what boon they wanted.

The rishis said, "Let Gautama be turned out from this place."

Ganapathy said, "Gautama's tapasya was a blessing to all of you. Nemesis will visit you if you harm him."

The rishis were adamant, "Lord, you must grant our boon."

Ganesa said mildly, "Then let fate take her course," and disappeared.

Ganapathy came as an emaciated cow to Gautama's barley fields. Staggering over the plants, the spindly animal began to feed greedily in that field, trampling what it did not eat. When he saw the cow, Gautama tried to chase it away with a clutch of long grass. No sooner did he touch the animal with the grasses, than it fell dead at his feet.

The rishis and their wives rushed into the asrama and began to shout, "Gautama is a cow slaughterer!"

Madness upon them, the brahmanas' wives even threatened to kill Ahalya. The brahmanas cried, "Gautama, sinner, the face of a killer should not be seen. As long as you stay in this asrama the devas and the pitrs will

never accept our offerings. Go from here, take your criminal sishyas with you."

They stoned Gautama and Ahalya. Tears streaming down his gentle face, Gautama cried to his tormentors, "Munis, I will leave at once, for Siva is angry with me."

His spirit in anguish, Gautama made his new asrama a krosa away from the old one, with the brahmanas' permission. They said, "As long as the curse of slaughter is upon you, you may offer no worship to the gods or the manes, nor perform any Vedic ritual."

By now believing himself that he had sinned, humble Gautama lived without worship of any kind for fifteen days. He could not bear it. He came to the edge of the old settlement around Varuna's pool and called meekly to the brahmanas. They would not come near him: he was untouchable and they warned him to stand at a distance. He begged them, "Holy ones, take pity on me. I will do anything to purify myself and be able to worship again."

The brahmanas said, "There must be proper expiation for such a heinous sin. You must walk round the earth thrice, announcing your crime, then come back here and keep a fast for a month. Or go round this Brahmagiri Mountain a hundred and one times. Or else, walk around the mountain eleven times in pradakshina, then fetch water from the Ganga and purify yourself. Then make a crore of Siva lingas and bathe again in the Ganga."

Innocent Gautama cried happily, "Rishis, thank you for showing a sinner the way. I will go round the mountain and make parthiva Siva lingas to worship."

So he did, joyfully, with the virtuous Ahalya and their disciples serving them. One day, as Gautama sat worshipping him before an earthen linga, Siva appeared before the humble rishi, with a thousand ganas. Gautama wept in rapture, he begged Sankara, "Lord, make me sinless again."

Siva laughed. "Gautama, you are already sinless, the evil brahmanas deceived you."

Siva revealed everything to the muni: how the jealous hermits connived to evict him from the asrama, how Ganapathy was obliged to help them. Siva said softly, "For those brahmanas there will be no atonement, only death."

Gautama protested! "Lord, except for what they did I would never have seen you like this."

How pleased Siva was. "Oh, you are a blessed muni. Ask me for anything, holy Gautama."

Bowing his head, Gautama said, "Lord, whatever five powerful men decide comes to pass in this world; so we are always in danger. If you are pleased, let the Ganga be given to me for my safety."

No sooner did he speak, than crystal waters stood before him in the shape of a beautiful goddess. Gautama bowed to her, "Devi, you have sanctified the world. Now bless me also since I am likely to fall into hell."

Siva said to Ganga, "Devi, bless this saint. In his name, stay in this place until the kali yuga begins and Vivacity's son is the twenty-eighth Manu."

Ganga said shyly to Siva, "Lord, you stay with me here."

Ever since, Siva dwells in the earthen linga that Gautama worshipped.

When the Ganga flowed there from the branches of an udumbara tree, Gautama and his disciples bathed in her and that place was called Gangadvara. The other brahmanas, who had deceived Gautama, arrived for their ablutions. The holy river vanished.

Gautama said, "Ganga, even if these men are blind with arrogance, by the virtue in this sacred place, you must grant them a vision of yourself."

Ganga replied, "These are the most evil men, ungrateful and treacherous. They are unworthy of such a vision."

"Mother, the Lord has said, 'I am sanctified in this world by the one who helps those that harm him.'"

"Noblest Rishi, be it as you want. But first, let these sinners perform the same penance they forced upon you in mockery."

By Gautama's mercy, the brahmanas were purified of their sin in the Ganga; their eyes opened, they came to his feet in genuine repentance. The Ganga, which flows there from the trough named Kusavarta, is called the Gautami and the linga in which Siva remains is known as Tryambakeswara, the destroyer of great sins.

Whenever Brihaspati, Jupiter, is in the constellation of Simha, the Lion, once in twelve years, Hari and the devas, the holy tirthas embodied, Kasi and the others, the blessed lakes, Pushkara and the rest and the sacred

rivers, come to Gangadvara to bathe and to worship Siva as the Jyotirlinga on the banks of the Gautami. While they stay here, their powers wane in their original abodes and wax again only after that year is past.

TWENTY-ONE

Vaidyanatha

The nineteenth kalpa was called Svetalohita. In it, Siva first incarnated himself as Sadyojata. When Brahma saw him, with a tuft on his head, he knew he was Iswara and worshipped him with folded hands. As he meditated on that Being, who was Brahman incarnate, four white and heroic sons were born to Brahma: Sunanda, Nandana, Viswananda and Upanandana. Brahma's sons made a pradakshina around Sadyojata and he lovingly gave Brahma perfect wisdom and the power to create.

In the twentieth kalpa, known as the Rakta, Brahma was red and brilliant, when he meditated on the Brahman for grace. Suddenly, a son stood before him, wearing crimson garments, rubies and scarlet garlands; his eyes were red as blood. Brahma knew him as Vamadeva and he was Siva. Brahma's sons of mind born from Vamadeva's power were Viraja, Vivaha, Visoka and Viswabhavana. A delighted Parameswara gave Brahma the power of creation and perfect wisdom.

In the twenty-first kalpa, Pithavasas, Brahma wore yellow; when he prayed for sons, a resplendent and fulvid being was born to him. When Brahma worshipped him with the Siva Gayatri Japa, which is the great Devi, ochre-clad sons were born from his sides, teachers of the yogic path.

A thousand years after the kalpa of these ochre masters, all was Ekarnava again: an ocean of dissolution. Brahma grieved again for genesis. Walking towards him over those primal waters, he saw a black figure who yet shone like a sun with his own splendor. He wore black; he had a radiant black crown and a black sacred thread around his jet body. Brahma worshipped that Soul of dreadful exploits as Aghora. The Creator thought deeply on Aghora as Brahman and from his sides sprang four sons, dark as Aghora himself, as brilliant: called Krishna, Krishnasikha, Krishnasya and Krishnakanthadhrika. For the sake of Brahma's creation, they began the miraculous yoga called Ghora, the Terrible.

In the kalpa Viswarupa, Saraswati, Vagiswari mother of the word, manifested herself: universe-bodied. Luminous Isana came to Brahma,

formed and formless and blessed him with four radiant sons: Jatin, Mundin, Sikhandin and Ardhamunda.

These were Siva's five forms in the five kalpas, Sadyojata, Purusha, Aghora, Vamadeva and Isana, each known by their color. From them, we might conjecture, the different races of men originated.

*

Ravana, the brilliant and arrogant lord of Lanka and the rakshasas, worshipped Siva on Mount Kailasa with fierce devotion. For long years, his tapasya raged, but Siva did not come to him. Ravana dug a pit in a tapovana on the southern slopes of Himavan and kindled five fires in it. He installed a Siva linga before him and, standing in the flames, he worshipped Rudra. Still Siva did not come to him. Ravana cut off his heads, one by one and fed them to the fire. When he cut off nine of his ten heads, Sankara appeared before the Rakshasa. Siva restored his severed heads to Ravana and asked him gently what boon he wanted.

Ravana said, "Lord, I want to take this linga to Lanka. Bless me with unequalled strength and your protection."

Siva said, "Take the linga, Rakshasa. But remember it will remain wherever you set it down first."

Siva vanished and Ravana began the long journey back to Lanka. On the way, the Rakshasa, that master of tapasya, felt an irresistible call of nature. He gave the Siva linga to a cowherd he met and asked the man to hold it for him while he relieved himself nearby. Ravana did not come back for half an hour and the cowherd could not bear the weight of the linga any more: the strange linga of the essence of diamonds that grew so heavy in his arms. He set it down on the earth and at once, the phallic image took immovable root.

That Jyotirlinga Vaidyanatha is a legend through the worlds. It bestows earthly pleasures of every kind and moksha thereafter.

Ravana still had the immense strength Siva had blessed him with and he came home jubilant to Lanka. When they heard about Siva's boon to him, the devas grew anxious: they did not know what exactly the Lord had given the Demon. Through the ages, Narada muni pretends to be a friend of all the greatest rakshasas and asuras. By skyways of light, along

which the wise travel as swiftly as thought, the devas sent Narada to Ravana's city.

Wide-eyed and curious, Narada demanded to hear all about his tremendous prayatna, at which Siva himself had appeared before Ravana. With cunning flattery, gasping at appropriate junctures, the wandering rishi elicited every detail of his tapasya from the Rakshasa and of Siva's boon, as well. Ravana was so excited about the blessing he was very willing to dwell on each particular: the feeding of his nine heads to the five fires, the splendor of Siva's manifestation.

Ravana finally told Narada the awful truth, that Siva had given him limitless strength. The Rakshasa added, "Now, dear friend, I will conquer the three worlds."

Wily Narada embraced Ravana. He said, "Of course, you know you must be careful with Siva's boons. He is so absorbed in dhyana, you can never be sure he will remember what he has promised you. Besides, you have lost the Jyotirlinga, your link to him. Since I am so fond of you, I will tell you the one sure way by which you can refresh his memory without another tapasya. You must lift up Kailasa on which Siva sits and gently set it down again. Then he will remember his boon to you and know you are grateful."

Stupid with power, deluded by fate, Ravana set out straightaway for the mountain. He drew Kailasa from the earth by its roots and held it aloft. Everything around Siva at his dhyana turned awry. Angrily the Lord cried, "Who dares shake my mountain?"

Laughing, Sivaa told him, "Gratitude from your devotee the rakshasa. Ravana is showing you how strong he is now."

Losing his temper for a moment, Siva cursed the Demon, "Arrogant Rakshasa, a destroyer of your vanity will soon be born."

Narada smiled when he heard this. Ravana, who did not hear Siva's curse, went happily back to Lanka, certain he had reminded Rudra of his bhakti.

TWENTY-TWO

Naageswara

Obeisance to Hiranyagarbha, the eternal Purusha, Self-born Lord from whom all kalpas and all beings emanate! Hiranyagarbha created only the waters first. He instilled virility into them. The waters were called Naara, they belonged to Nara; since they were his abode, he was called Naarayana.

When Hiranyagarbha blessed them, a golden egg floated on those waters. After a year, Hiranyagarbha clove the egg in two: he made heaven and earth. He created fourteen worlds from the halves of the egg and, from between, he made cosmic space, akasa. He created the earth floating on the waters and the ten quarters in the firmament. Then he created mind, speech, love, anger and sexual delight. Hiranyagarbha made the Saptarishi, the seven sages, from his thought and the seven great families descended from them. He made the lightning, the thunderclouds, the red clouds and the rainbow.

He made the devas of light from his mouth, the manes from his breast and the asuras of darkness from his loins. All kinds of creatures then flowed from him, as Apava generated aquatic life. When they were not fruitful, he cleaved himself and made man and woman.

*

Listen to the story of the excellent linga Nageswara.

The great vana of the Rakshasa Daruka fringed the western shores, stretching sixteen dense yojanas in every direction. Parvati herself had given care of this jungle to the Rakshasa's wife Darukaa. Whenever the Demoness wandered into it with her husband, the forest responded with green exuberance. But the power they enjoyed by Uma's blessing was heady and being what they were, demons, Daruka and Darukaa terrorised the other jungle dwellers.

Rishi Aurva, the son of Urva and Bhrigu's grandson, lived in that jungle. The foresters came to him and said, "Maharishi, when they see

you, with Siva's grace shining from you like a sun, the rakshasas flee. Save us, Aurva, you are our only sanctuary."

Many of their kinsfolk had been tortured or killed by Daruka, his mate and their demons and Aurva pronounced, "If they cause you any more grief, they will suffer terribly. I curse them that if they torment the people of the earth their very race will perish."

Aurva worshipped the devas to protect his jungle folk. The ones of light heard his prayer; they flew down to that vana to battle Daruka's rakshasas. At first, the demons fought back strongly. When they saw their people being killed in battle, while the devas were immortal, they grew afraid and huddled together to confer. Darukaa told her rakshasas, "Parvati once said to me 'There is an island in the ocean, just off the shore. Whenever you want, you can go there.'"

In fear of the shining devas, the rakshasas took to the air, like winged mountains of old and flew to that island. There they built a great and horrible city for themselves. By Uma's blessing to Darukaa, in no time another Daruka vana, as dense as the other, grew around the city. The rakshasas never returned to the mainland. Now they turned their depredations on seafaring folk, sailors and fishermen.

The island rakshasas' piracy was savage and relentless. Darukaa herself often waded out into the ocean, just waist-deep for her when she grew to her full, stupendous height. She would loom suddenly over merchant ships, capsize them and sport viciously with the drowning sailors, pushing them under the waves and laughing at their screams.

Once, the demons captured a flotilla of ships, whose captain was a vaishya called Supriya. Supriya and his merchants were brought in chains to the rakshasas' grim city. They were imprisoned in grisly dungeons strewn with half-eaten corpses. Supriya was a Sivabhakta. He wore bhasma and rudraksha and he would never eat or sleep without first worshipping Mahadeva.

In that rat- and snake-infested dungeon, he made an earthen linga of the Lord. He taught his fellow merchants the six-syllabled mantra, **AUM Namah Sivayah** and the way of worshipping Sankara, while they awaited an awful death at their monstrous captors' hands. A portion of the food tossed to them through grates set in the ceiling they offered to Siva. These scraps vanished as soon as they were offered. They knew Rudra accepted their worship; they knew the Lord was with them in their travail.

Sometimes, the rakshasas peered through the grates and laughed uproariously at their captives' ceaseless worship. But one day, walking alone in a dark corridor of that labyrinthine city, a soldier of Daruka's saw Siva before him, splendid and awesome, cobras coiled round him. With a wail, the demon fled to his master and reported what he had seen.

Daruka flew down to the dungeons in frenzy and cried to Supriya, "Vaishya, who do you worship here in the darkness? Tell me truly and you will not die."

Supriya said, "I do not know."

Daruka screeched, "Kill him for his secret!"

The rakshasas seized Supriya and drew their swords. The merchant cried, "Siva, save me!"

In a flash of light, Siva erupted out of a rock crevice, nitid before the cowering demons. He ashed them with a breath. In a miraculous instant, the dungeons were transformed into a shining temple and the Lord's grace was upon his bhaktas. Siva said in anger, "Let there never be tamasic creation anymore!"

For Supriya's suffering, he made ashes of every male rakshasa on that island. Darukaa prayed fervently to Parvati, who had blessed her for a tapasya performed long ago. The Goddess appeared before her. Darukaa said, "Uma, Mother, save my race!"

Bound by the Rakshasi's bhakti, Parvati said, "I will."

Parvati confronted her Lord.

"Siva, let your curse be fruitful at the end of the yuga; until then, let there be tamasic creation as well. Darukaa is my own Shakti; honour my boon to her. Let these rakshasis be fertile of themselves and bear sons."

So it came to pass. The parthiva linga, which Supriya and his followers worshipped, is called Nageswara. At the end of the kali yuga, or when the krita yuga dawns, Mahasena's son Virasena, the king of Nishada and a peerless Sivabhakta, makes a fishlike and submarine canoe, coated with tin, brass and copper. Siva creates a yogamaya, a mantle of invisibility for that kshatriya. With his men, Virasena sails to the Rakshasi Darukaa's island. On a moonless night, entering the same crevice from which Siva sprang, Virasena receives the Paasupatastra from the Lord: with it, he obliterates Darukaa's race. Thus, the immaculate age begins: the halcyon krita yuga.

In the Daruka vana on that island, Parvati is called Nageswari. Blessed are those that hear the tale of Supriya, the merchant of the sea and the Jyotirlinga Nageswara. Their sins are washed away and they attain moksha after knowing every worldly joy.

TWENTY-THREE

Rameswara, Ghusmeswara

Of all the continents, this one is the land of sacred rites. From here, heaven and salvation are attained. Truly, the man who does not strive for moksha, despite being born human in the land of Bharatavarsha, betrays his very soul. It is the land of pleasure, too.

In the guise of passing days and nights, pieces of life fall away and death is always at hand. The sacred twin-syllabled name, Siva, is the way to nirvana. As the lotus is not stained by water, those that worship Siva are not stained by sin.

*

Hear about the glory of the Jyotirlinga Rameswara.

Vishnu was born on earth as Rama. Ravana of Lanka abducted Rama's wife Sita. In quest of her, Rama came to Kishkinda, where he made an ally of the vanara Sugriva, of the race of monkeys. Sugriva's brother Vali had taken his throne and his wife. Rama killed Vali and restored Sugriva as king of the jungle. From Kishkinda, led by Vayu's son Hanuman, Sugriva's vanaras went forth to comb the world for Sita. Hanuman discovered her in an asokavana in Lanka, where she was Ravana's prisoner. Sita gave him a jewelled ring to take back to Rama, so he would know Hanuman had found her.

With a wild army of vanaras, Rama and his brother Lakshmana came to the shore of the southern ocean of salt. They stood forlorn on a pale beach, uncertain how they would cross the wide and plumbless water. They stood thinking unhappily of the might of Ravana and his rakshasas, of Ravana's son Indrajit, who had vanquished Indra in battle. Rama's throat was parched and he said to Lakshmana, "My brother, I am thirsty."

No sooner were the words out of his lips than a score of vanaras sprang away to fetch the best water they could find. The Blue One laughed gently when ten of the bright folk brought back pure, sweet water for him in leaves and in cupped palms. He took a little from the long hands of each

one and was about to drink. Then he thought, "I have not worshipped Siva, the saviour."

Rama made a parthiva linga on that shore and worshipped it, offering the holy water. His heart filling with faith, Rama prayed, "Bhaavatarana, who take men across the ocean of samsara, this ocean before me is so deep and the rakshasa across it so powerful. More, he is your bhakta: invincible, conqueror of the three worlds. Siva, an army of monkeys is a fickle instrument with which to fight a war. Only your grace and partiality can save me. I have been your bhakta since before time began. Help me now."

Rama worshipped Siva with flowers and mantras, songs and more water, until Rudra stood forth from the earthen linga, bright as a star. Rama petitioned him, "Lord, let my army of vanaras cross safely over this ocean to Lanka, where Ravana believes he is unassailable. Siva, let me vanquish the arrogant rakshasa in battle."

Siva said, "Rama, so it is written."

Rama of absolute faith said, "Mahadeva, stay in this place to help bhaktas of the future across the sea of samsara, as you have helped me cross this sea of water today."

Siva blessed Rameswara to be a Jyotirlinga: he remained in that parthiva linga with which Sri Rama worshipped him. By Siva's blessing, Rama, Lakshmana and the vanaras crossed the sea into Lanka. They brought death to Ravana and rescued the precious Sita.

The linga at Rameswara destroys the sins of bhaktas; it shows them the way across the turbulent sea of samsara.

Listen to the story of the Jyotirlinga Ghusmesa.

A fine brahmana, a knower of Brahman, a descendant of Bharadvaja, Sudharma lived with his wife Sudeha near the Devagiri Mountain. Though they were wealthy, generous and devoted, Sudharma and Sudeha had no children. This did not perturb Sudharma; he knew how to count his blessings and that fate always keeps earthly happiness imperfect so that men remember God. Sudeha felt pangs of inadequacy and guilt. She was certain that she was the barren one. The wise Sudharma would gently reproach his wife when she dwelt upon their childlessness. He said to her, "Sudeha, it is a selfish world. As time passes, there is no father or mother, no son or lover, but only God."

But once Sudeha visited a neighbour and a quarrel broke out between them over some pettiness. The other woman screamed at Sudeha, "At least I have a son to inherit what we own. How will a barren wretch like you die peacefully, when the king will take all you have? That's why you are so vicious."

That evening, Sudeha was inconsolable. She cried hysterically that they must do something, anything at all, but she must have a son. He could not pacify her and Sudharma offered two flowers to Siva, at his sacrificial fire, marking one that would give them a son. He held the flowers out to Sudeha, told her to choose and she picked the wrong one. Sudharma said, "Even Siva isn't willing for us to have a son. Why not be content with everything with which he has blessed us? There must be an excellent reason for our not having children."

She wept again and then, as a storm gagged, grew ominously quiet. A slightly mad smile tugged at her mouth. She said, "If Siva does not will it, let me not have a son. But you will take another woman for your wife and have a son by her. You must have an heir."

Sudharma cried, "Don't tempt fate, woman!" and walked out.

The next day, Sudeha brought her younger sister Ghusma to their home and said, "Take her, you must."

Sudharma warned her, "If she has a child you will be jealous of her. Look at you: as it is, you have no control over yourself."

Sudeha laughed, "She is my sister, I will not be jealous of her."

She fell at his feet and insisted tearfully that he marry Ghusma, or else she, Sudeha, would kill herself. Sudharma married his wife's younger sister. Sudeha was so pleased she served Ghusma as if she herself was a servant in the house and Ghusma the mistress. At every opportunity, she sent Ghusma to Sudharma alone.

Ghusma had a different character altogether and learnt how to worship Siva from her husband. She fashioned fine lingas from clay, sanctified them with mantras and cast them into the nearby lake. She had time on her hands because Sudeha would not allow her to do any housework. When she made her hundred-thousandth linga, Ghusma conceived and gave birth to a fine son.

Now, when Sudeha saw how fondly her husband took her sister's son in his arms, her heart blazed up in green fire.

All the family celebrated the long awaited birth and Sudeha was in hell with envy. For a long time, she controlled herself and pretended she too was overjoyed with the child; and not Sudharma or his son made any difference between the sisters. Indeed, both father and son were partial to the elder wife. It was Sudeha the boy called Mother and his reposed and ineffusive mother he called Aunt. But Sudeha's mind seethed and slowly her hatred turned her into a malevolent creature.

When his boy grew up, Sudharma got him married and the daughter-in-law came to live with them. Sudeha could no longer contain herself. One day, when her husband told her how happy she must be with her son and daughter-in-law in the house, she screamed, "Not my son and daughter-in-law, only yours!"

For the first time, the poor man realised that everything in his home was not as he had naively imagined. For years, Sudeha had secretly nurtured her malice and it had festered within her. That night, she decided the only way she could douse the fire in her heart was with her sister's tears. Her daughter-in-law had her period and was sleeping in another room. At midnight, the monster within took control: she stole into her nephew's room and murdered him in his sleep. In a savage ritual, she dismembered him with a kitchen knife while, after long, dry years, her body was wracked by fiendish excitement and she panted and slavered like a bitch on heat. Sudeha threw the severed limbs into the lake, where her sister Ghusma still cast her parthiva lingas every day.

In the morning, the daughter-in-law found some pieces of his flesh in her husband's bed and splashes of blood everywhere. She ran screaming to Sudeha: who to her was her mother-in-law and Ghusma just her husband's aunt. After the release of the night's horrible ritual, Sudeha was radiant at her puja. She beat her breast in pretended grief; she wept inconsolably. When Ghusma was told the horrific news, she did not stir. Only when she had finished her worship, did she come to look at that awful room. Tears in her eyes, Ghusma said with dignity, "Siva who gives life takes it also. Only the Lord knows the reasons why everything happens as it does."

As she did each day, the composed Ghusma took her earthen lingas to the lake to immerse them. Her hands trembling with the grief her heart felt, she cast the lingas into the water, one by one. Suddenly she saw her son emerge from the lake and stand luminous before her. The serene

Ghusma welcomed her child back among the living. Then, in a mass of glory, Siva appeared before them. In an echoing voice, he promised, "Sudeha is a murderess and I will impale her on my trisula."

Prostrating before him, Ghusma begged, "Spare my sister, Lord. Sadasiva, just the sight of you will wash away her sin."

Siva blessed the faithful Ghusma, "Saintly woman, you are a mistress of your heart as few maharishis are. Ask me for anything you want."

The wise, compassionate and far-sighted Ghusma said softly to Mahadeva, "Stay here, Lord, to protect the world."

Siva said, "Ghusma, best among my bhaktas, I bless your family for a hundred generations. May all your sons be wealthy and devoted. This lake shall always be a home of my lingas and I will remain here in your name for all time."

Before the eyes of Ghusma and her son resurrected by his grace, Siva dwindled into an unmoving Jyotirlinga. He has dwelt there since; he still stands on the bank of the sacred Sivalaya lake. By Siva's grace and Ghusma's prayers, Sudeha's mind was freed from envy and hatred. Tearfully, in joy, as one exorcised of a devil, she embraced her husband and her sister, her son and daughter-in-law. Now, becoming as composed as Ghusma, for long years she performed a relentless penance at the lake, before the Ghusmesa linga. Until, Siva took her sin from her.

Such are Siva's twelve Jyotirlingas of mystical light on earth. He dwells in them for the world's protection. The Purana says that hearing about these sacred lingas purifies a man of his sins, confers every worldly pleasure on him and moksha thereafter.

The Sarabha and the Sudarshana

TWENTY-FOUR

Countless are the incarnations of Sadasiva in time, across the universe: as many as there are stars in the sky, grains of sand on earth, or raindrops that fall through all the kalpas. More.

Once, Brahma's son Sanatkumara cursed Vishnu's dwarapalakas, Jaya and Vijaya. They would not allow some divine rishis, who came as bright children, into the presence of the Blue God. Sanatkumara cursed them to three demonical births on earth. They were first born as Diti and Kashyapa's sons, Hiranyakashyapu and Hiranyaksha.

When Brahma implored him, Vishnu incarnated himself as Varaha the Boar to lift the earth out of the sea of dissolution and he liberated Hiranyaksha, goring him to death. When Hiranyakashyapu heard that Vishnu had slain his brother, dear as breath to him, the Asura worshipped Brahma for ten thousand years for a boon.

"Let no one that you have created kill me: not man, beast or immortal. Let my death not come by day or night, from above or below. Let me not die indoors or outside, not on the ground or in the sky, or by any weapon."

Brahma granted him all this and Hiranyakashyapu was convinced he had immortality. For ninety-six thousand years, that lord of the daityas tyrannised the worlds. Indra and the devas could not kill him because of Brahma's boon and at last they prayed to Vishnu to save them from the Asura.

Prahlada, greatest among Vishnubhaktas, was born as Hiranyakashyapu's son. The Demon threatened the boy's life because he worshipped the God that he, the father, abhorred. Vishnu emerged from a pillar in Hiranyakashyapu's court: he was a terrible being, neither man nor beast. Roaring, he seized the Demon, carried him to the threshold of his palace, not indoors or out. Taking him onto his fearsome lap, not on the ground or in the sky, the Narasimha killed him, tearing his heart out with his talons, when it was not day or night, but twilight.

So ferocious was Vishnu's Avatara, that not even slaughtering Hiranyakashyapu's awesome legions, by claw, fang and fire from its jaws, could calm its implacable heart. That incarnation blazed in every direction, burning even the sky. The devas were terrified; if the beast's rage did not subside, it would consume the universe.

They sent Prahlada to the Narasimha. At once, picking the boy up in his arms, the Manticore embraced him and licked his face with love. Seizing their chance, the devas scurried away to Siva. "Mahadeva, only you can save us from the Narasimha!"

Siva sent Virabhadra to the Narasimha. When the Awful One set Prahlada down gently and turned snarling on him, Virabhadra said, "Vishnu, as Matsya, Kuurma and Varaha you protected the universe. Why do you want to destroy it now? Give up this terrible form of yours, Narayana, be yourself again."

But mysterious are the Avataras. Baring his fangs, the Narasimha roared at Virabhadra, "I am Kaala, destroyer of worlds; the universe is only part of my own nature. Little lord of ganas, I am the death of Death and I will consume the stars!"

Virabhadra laughed in the Narasimha's face. "Have you no more incarnations to incarnate, O Vishnu, that you beg to make this your last? You roar so loudly because you have killed one puny demon. My lord Siva □ who manifests himself between heaven and earth, between Indra and Agni, between Yama and Varuna, in the light of the moon and the heart of darkness, who, if you are Kaala, is Kaalakaala □ bids me say to you that if you do not subdue yourself, Bhairava will be upon you again."

But the Narasimha roared so the constellations trembled. He grew before Virabhadra's eyes: huger than creation, wilder than death, blazing cosmic fire. In a flash, Virabhadra vanished from that place and suddenly Siva's light shone there, on earth and sky, enveloping everything,

awesome, beyond compare. Not of the sun or the moon was that light; it was dark and bright at once, unprecedented. Siva himself stood forth from that light as the deformed Rudra and as the Sarabha: a terrific golden bird whose wing-span was eternity, a thousand adamantine claws flashing, fanged and four-legged, scimitar-beaked, black-necked, three-eyed, hissing an unbearable humkara. Beside that Apparition, the Narasimha seemed like a glow-worm next to the sun.

Burning with mystery, the Sarabha bound the Narasimha in the coils of his tail. Effortlessly, he seized him in his talons and flew into the sky. There, the Sarabha made a swift end of the Beast born to kill Hiranyakashyapu. Back to his old form again, blue and four-armed, humbled, returned to his good sense, Vishnu cried, "O Hara, curber of Hari! You are the ultimate saviour. Only you could have quelled the Narasimha, it was beyond me then to master myself."

Mahavishnu bowed low to Mahadeva. Siva tore its hide from the Narasimha and wore it on his body from that day. The head of the Manticore became the foremost bead on his necklace of skulls.

*

Listen to how Vishnu acquired the Sudarshana chakra.

Long ago, the Asura Sridaman overran creation. By a rare boon, he had the power of Sri Lakshmi to command. With the fortune of the worlds in his grasp, Sridaman and his daityas marched on Vaikunta: that Demon meant to pluck the Srivatsa from Vishnu's chest!

Hari flew to Kailasa. Standing on a single toe of his foot, he worshipped Siva for a millennium. He worshipped Hara with holy flowers from the Manasa lake: a lotus for every one of the thousand names of Siva he chanted each day. Siva stealthily stole one lotus, to test how sincere this worship was, to see if Vishnu would notice the missing flower. Vishnu noticed at once. In a night, he combed swarga, bhumi and patala for the flower; but he did not find it. The next morning, when he chanted the last of the thousand names, Sarvasattvaalambana, Vishnu calmly plucked out one of his eyes and offered it to Siva in place of the missing lotus. Siva appeared before him in light and gave him the very wheel of time for his weapon: the profound Sudarshana chakra.

That chakra was made from Siva's feet; it shines with the splendor of ten thousand suns. Like the year, it has twelve spokes, six naves and two yokes. Alive in the spokes, are the distant devas: Agni, Soma, Mitra, Varuna, Indra, Indraghi, the viswadevas, the prajapatis, Hanuman, Dhanvantari, Tapas and Tapasya, the months and the zodiac. In its swiftness are wind, water, fire, earth, air and sky. At the spokes' edges are the clouds of the dissolution, lightning, the planets and stars, beyond which sit the seers and the Balakhilyas. The glory of Sadasiva is in the Sudarshana!

Legend has it that, when he received the tremendous chakra, Hari's heart still quailed to think of Sridaman. He said to Bhava, "Lord, how can I be sure the Sudarshana will be irresistible in every exigency?"

Siva replied, "Cast the chakra at me."

Vishnu cast the Sudarshana at Paramasiva and the whirling wheel cut Mahadeva in three. Yet, he stood there smiling! With a cry, Vishnu fell at Siva's feet. Siva said serenely, "Arise, Mahabaho: only my manifested body is truncated, my Being is beyond every weapon. These three parts of me will be forever among men as Hiranyaksha, Suvarnaksha and Virupaksha. Do not grieve; I told you to cast the chakra at me. Go and quell your enemies with it."

Armed with the Sudarshana chakra, Vishnu blazed forth from Kailasa and no evil could stand against him anymore. Sridaman, who humiliated the devas, who stole the fortune of the worlds, stood roaring before Hari. Vishnu said, "Daitya, your life is at an end."

Quick as a thought, the Sudarshana cut the Asura's head from his sin-swollen body. Both tumbled down the Himalaya in a crimson avalanche. Hymning Siva, Narayana returned to the eternal waters: which are his abode and his rest.

UMA

TWENTY-FIVE

The Mountain and his wife

It broke my heart when Sati did what she did at her father's sacrifice. Giving Daksha a goat's head, was small consolation for me. I remember those days of aloneness, those savage days of separation; I remember them like a nightmare. I made myself a necklace of her delicate bones, which were all there was left of her when the yogic fire she summoned upon her petal body had done its work and homeless, I ranged the world.

But then, deep in my heart I had always known that, for all its ecstasies, our marriage was a cursed one from the start; and the fault was mine. I was too enamoured of the atman, too obsessed with the life of the spirit. So that when Brahma, Hari and the others first came asking me to marry, I thoughtlessly enumerated the perfections I expected in my bride. I swore I would abandon her, if she doubted me for even a moment. I had not met Sati then; I did not dream that anyone like her could exist in the flesh. I had not yet known love. Of course, Brahma was determined to have revenge on me for taunting him when I found him in his daughter's arms; but I always wondered why Vishnu did not warn me that I would pay for my conceit. How I paid.

I cannot recall how many years or aeons the lonely torment lasted. I remember how the icy ravines would echo my anguished howls back at me. The pain of those days was not ordinary. It was as if I paid in full and forever, for being who I am. I was mad then; my body was on fire with losing her. The agony in my bones was as if they broke and mended and broke again, each moment. Nowhere does there exist a purer hell than those first days or years or centuries after she died. It was exceptional, my anguish: none but I could have borne it. And accompanying it, the mind's venomous taunting, "It would never have happened had you gone with her!"

I remember I fell into the Yamuna and that wavy lock of the earth's hair was burned black by my grief. The river has flowed dark ever since. I wailed to Sati, I sang to her, I roared my bereavement at the stars. When I slept, I saw her in my dreams and cried, "Cruel woman, stay with me. Ah,

don't forsake me, Sati. Don't be angry, I will come with you to your father's yagna. Look at me, I worship you every moment. You said to me once 'I cannot live without you', but you lied. Look how I burn: hold me or I will die!"

I would wake screaming as she faded from my sleep. Like a mad man, I went to the asramas of the rishis of the cedar forest. The rishis' wives became crazed when I danced naked before them, all except Arundhati and Anasuya. The sages cursed my phallus to fall off: my linga, which I held in my hand to tell their wives of my despair and I crooned in grief, inflaming them. The worlds quaked at my falling linga, which split the earth, pierced the patalas and rent the cosmic egg. Now Vishnu, Brahma and the devas went pleading to her: to return to me, or I would destroy the universe in my madness. Then, with the linga ritually installed and her promise to return given, my body was whole again.

Time is a healer without equal. I realised that not all my tears, not my chanting her name ceaselessly and dementedly would bring her back before it was time. Soon enough, I sought my old refuge again, my timeless sanctuary: the sweet forgetfulness hidden in the heart's deep: the Satchitananda, the bliss of Brahman. It was a familiar country. But at first, the return was not easy, like coming home to an old lover who had always waited for you though you had been unfaithful to her. However, I soon sank back into the sea of peace; I plunged myself deep into myself.

Initially, my distraught mind would not be still and her face haunted my every thought as a peerless fury. I saw her in life and death. I saw not merely her face; I saw her body with its velvet folds, each a vale of Brahman to me. I saw her breasts, night-black nipples taut; I heard her whispered and screamed ecstasies. Ah, why was I punished so cruelly? Then, I took firm hold of myself. I shut her out from my mind as irrevocably as she had shut herself from my life by dying. Slowly, peace came back to me, absorption. After some months, I could allow myself to think of her: but as a dream and almost painlessly. Yet, sometimes her last words, which my ganas carried home to me, would float like scarlet clouds across the horizon of my dhyana: "I will return to you when I am born to parents who respect me."

In time, my dhyana was immaculate again and I knew nothing save eternity then. That condition was not susceptible to sorrow, even at the memory of Sati. Once more, I was aware of everything and nothing; and if

part of me ached for her still upon some small world of time, I was unaware of it. I lost myself, as I never had before there was Sati. Fleeting, I thought this was why she came into my life, to make my tapasya purer when she left. What else could I think?

Once, when we were so happy together, so much in love, we lived upon the Himalaya. I remember there was a woman there: Mena, the wife of Himachala, lord of mountains. Mena loved Sati like her own child. She would set her in her lap and comb out her tresses that hung to her ankles, singing softly to her, calling her daughter in her resonant mountain tongue. I watched them often, from hiding and I wondered if they were not in fact mother and daughter. So comfortable did they seem with each other, as if they belonged together in that bond into which they had not been born.

Almost every day, Mena would send us all kinds of delicacies she had cooked herself, often with the wistful message 'for my child'. She always kept her distance from me; and not from any resentment for what I was, of that I was sure. Perhaps it was a sense of propriety; or was it awe? But I was too much in love to bother to know Mena closely. She would always wish me if I came upon Sati and her, talking and laughing together, the 'mother' often telling her 'daughter' ancient tales. She would rise hastily and, after wishing me, hurry away, promising to meet Sati the next day. Sati called her Amma. Mena wanted her to and, out of her hearing, I think I did too, once and we laughed over that slip of my tongue. Since when did Siva have a mother or father?

Sati had told me about Mena's birth, that she was Daksha's granddaughter. Daksha gave sixty of his daughters in marriage to the rishis, to Kashyapa and the others and they were the original mothers of creation. Svadha he gave to the pitrs, the manes. Svadha bore three daughters: Mena the eldest, Dhanya in the middle and Kalavati the youngest. None of them was born from her womb; they were children of thought and pure. Once, they went to Swetadipa, the white island that is part of Hari's realm, to visit Mahavishnu. They stayed there for a time, at his knowing invitation.

It was while they were on Swetadipa, dazzled by Narayana's nearness, that Brahma's son Sanaka and some other siddhas came to visit the Blue God. Everyone in Vishnu's sabha stood up when the holy ones made their entrance. But Svadha's daughters, whispering together in

wonder at being in the miraculous place, did not rise. They did not know they should. A silence fell on that court and Sanaka cursed the three, "You are the pitrs' daughters, but you are shallow and haughty. I curse you to leave heaven and be born as women of the earth!"

The girls were in tears; they fell at Sanaka's feet. They begged him, "Siddha, we meant no disrespect, we were dazzled at being near Vishnu. We beg you, bless us as well so we may return to swarga, or we are doomed forever."

Vishnu, who knows everything, glanced at Sanaka and put a thought in the sage's mind, so he wondered at his own anger of a moment ago. Now Sanaka blessed the three young women. "You will all be saved by your daughters on earth, for they shall be the Devi's incarnations. Mena, your child will be Siva's wife. You, Dhanya, shall mother Sita who will marry Rama. And Kalavati will have Radha for her daughter and she will be Krishna's secret love."

There was something I did not know. When Sati ashed herself at Daksha's yagna, with her last breath she wished to be born as Mena's daughter: so she would never again have to hear from me, even in jest, that she was Dakshayani, Daksha's child.

Mena married Himachala, most auspicious and lordly mountain, an amsa of Vishnu himself and my bhakta. For years, they were childless, engrossed though they were in each other and in love. One day, Vishnu came to Himachala's court with the other devas. Himachala welcomed them in joy. "Today all my tapasya has borne fruit! Tell me why you have come, Lord."

Vishnu blessed Himavan and said, "Siva's love Sati killed herself at Daksha's yagna. Before she died, she swore to return to Rudra, born from parents of whom she could be proud. I believe your wife and you were fond of Sati." He added meaningfully, "Even like your own daughter?"

Himachala could hardly believe his fortune. Overcome, he prostrated at Narayana's lotus feet. In transport, he mumbled over and over again, "So be it, so be it."

While I sank deeper into myself, knowing timelessness again after my heartbreak, the devas went back to worship the Mother of the universe who knows all things, Durga who is before any other was. They sang her praises without restraint, "O Sivaa, cause of everything, Mahat- and Avyakta-formed, tranquil, holy, subtle Gayatri! O Source of the Vedas,

Savitri, Saraswati and Lakshmi. O Maaya, Nidra, Devi of sinners, Devi of peace, O unknowable Mahakaali."

She came before them, mounted on her tiger. She was black, four-armed, wielding awesome weapons, her hair loose and unkempt, brilliant with a thousand priceless jewels worn carelessly, blinding as a sun. They lay on their faces before her. She said in her soft way, "Tell me, Vishnu, Brahma, O Devas, how can I help you?"

White-haired Brahma said humbly, for he had come to her once before, "Mother, not the Vedas or we, the Gods, know you entirely, O Durga, whose compassion cannot be conceived. The most sacred books speak in awe of you, saying only what you are not. O Kaali, who were Sati, who was once Siva's wife, be his wife again!"

Durga said calmly, "We cannot be apart much longer. Already, Himachala and Mena worship me to be born as their daughter. Deep in his heart, Siva also remembers my promise to return."

She vanished from their presence and they went back to their worlds in joy. Himavan and Mena worshipped Siva for twenty-seven years, so they might have a child. Mena worshipped Durga, devoutly, as an idol of clay on the banks of the holy Ganga in Aushadhiprastha, Himavan's capital. There were days when she fasted, taking only water; on others, air was her only sustenance. At the end of those years of penance and charity, Sivaa stood illustrious and unutterably lovely before Mena.

"Mena, choose your boon."

"Mother of great illusion, Mother who are the violence told of in the Atharvaveda, O eternal Prakriti who bring even Brahman under your spell, Mahamaaye bless me!"

Sivaa said again gently, "Ask and it shall be yours, Mena."

Taking a deep breath, Mena said, "Devi, bless me with children. Let me have a hundred sons, long lived and brave. And then, O Durga, you be born as my daughter to marry Rudra."

Parashakti said, "So be it," and was gone.

Mena clapped her hands and cried, "Jaya!"

She ran to her husband to give him the momentous news. When he saw her, he knew without her telling him that at last the boon was theirs.

Mainaka was the first child born to Himavan and Mena. He, too, in time, became a lord of mountains. When Indra sheared the wings of all mountains and made them flightless, only Mainaka escaped the Deva

king's Vajra, because Varuna hid him under his waves. Ninety-nine other sons were born to Himachala and his wife, before the Goddess subtly entered Himavan's mind and he blazed in sudden glory. She entered his blood and, mystically, his seed.

That night he loved Mena as he had never loved her before and her cries echoed across his embodied ridges in silver moonlight. At midnight, Mena conceived the Devi and the mountain's wife shone as if the moon was in her womb.

Mena became so weak during the first two months of her pregnancy she could not move from her bed. Her body could not bear the weight of even clothes or ornaments. Her face was as pale as a lodhra flower: Mena was like a moonless and overcast night when not a star can be seen. Her morning sickness lasted into the dusk. Who else could have borne such a child? It was like carrying the universe in her womb for nine months.

Her husband was full of desire for his wife. After the first two months of her pregnancy and before the seventh, she allowed him softly into her swelling body and their loving was a slow flame during those endless white nights. It was as if she who nestled in Mena's body kindled her parents' souls.

When those first months were over, when Mena had grown comfortable with her pregnancy, she was like a tender creeper thrusting out new leaves and flowers every day. She was radiant! Himavan called her his earth with treasure buried in her; his sami twig with fire latent in it. He nursed his pregnant wife as if he was her mother; and at nights, unflinching, they lay together in sweet rapture and were closer than they had ever been in their long love.

Soon, came the day when She would be born. Vishnu, Brahma and the devas came to Aushadhiprastha to bless Mena, whose cup brimmed dizzily over. She, the mother, was speechless; she could only weep for joy. The Gods blessed her and went back to their heavens. The day Mena's divine child was born, the sky was as clear as the wind. The stars and planets were quiet, the earth and her oceans were perfectly auspicious; fragrant breezes blew everywhere, harbingers of the most sacred tidings. The devas of light stood in the sky and beat tabors and drums. The gandharvas, vidyadharas and apsaras sang and danced in the subtle zone between heaven and earth.

Just before midnight, when the constellation Margasirsa conjoined with the moon, on that ninth day of the month of Madhu, Mena lay in labour, Himavan at her side. Like Ganga from the sphere of the moon, the Devi flowed out from Mena's body as a vision. She stood before her parents to be, in pristine majesty, in the familiar form of Sati; she blessed them.

Only then, with a last rending push from Mena's loins, she was born in blood as a human child dark as a blue lotus and wailing like any mortal infant; though mortal she was not. Like Lakshmi from the ocean of milk, came Uma from her mother's womb! It rained then, fragrantly. Fires in every hearth and yagna burned deep and calm; a luminous shower of petals fell upon the earth from above, blessing it. As I sat in dhyana, a thrill of augury coursed through my body, when Parvati, the mountain's daughter, was born.

TWENTY-SIX

The grove of dhyana

That dark child shone like a piece of the moon: I have spied on her past with my mystic mind. Himavan's city was festive at the birth of the Devi. Knowing who she was, her father named her Kaali; like the moon in autumn, like the Ganga during the rains, she grew in his palace. Though they had a hundred splendid sons, Kaali's parents would always rather be with their incomparable daughter. She was so loved by every member of that mountain family, that, though she was great Durga incarnate, they called her Parvati, mountain daughter.

When she was not yet six, the brilliant little girl, her skin black as kohl, her eyes blue as lotus petals, wanted to go off by herself to the river-bank: not to play with sand or dolls, but to sit in tapasya.

"U Ma! Oh no!" cried her mother Mena.

"Uma!" cried Parvati in disappointment. After that, they called her Uma, as well.

Uma had a short and unusual education. Himavan engaged a learned rishi as her tutor. But she already knew more than her guru did; because, even as the swans fly back to the Ganga in autumn, so, naturally, her ancient gyana returned to her. She was the very vision of her father's eye; he always wanted her in his fond gaze. He went to hide behind the river reeds, the lord of mountains, to spy on his daughter playing with her sakhis.

Once Narada arrived in Aushadipura. Himavan welcomed the wanderer and made him comfortable. He called Parvati and made her seek the maharishi's blessing. He said, "Divine Narada, read my daughter's palm. Foretell her future and say whose wife she will be."

Narada took the child's palm and studied it, with many a smile lighting his face and at last a frown flitting across it.

"Day by day, she will grow in beauty and grace like the moon waxing. She will bring her parents glory and her husband delight, whoever he may be. She will be great, she will be chaste and fetch joy wherever she goes.

I see every possible line of fortune in your child's hand, yet there is one line that is unlike all the rest. I cannot tell if it is a flaw or not, but it is exceptional. Himachala, this girl's husband will be a naked yogin, clad in only the wind and without any qualities. He will be free from lust and temptation, indifferent to wealth and honour. His clothes and manner will be inauspicious, even vulgar, to belie his heart and he will not have a mother or a father." Narada seemed to savour that extraordinary prediction.

There was a shocked silence from Himavan and Mena, but little Parvati glowed to hear what the rishi said: she knew it was Siva that Narada described. When she played by the river, she already made wet lingas of sand and she drew pictures of me from her imagination, all uncannily lifelike.

Himavan cried, "Muni, what is the way out of this misfortune? Whatever will I do? Is it true, what you say?"

Narada said with a smile, "Mountain, the lines in the palm are the lines of Brahma, they cannot lie. Now listen to something that will please you. There is indeed a groom for your bewitching daughter, who exactly fits the lines in her hand. Himavan, he is Siva who lives in the world as Rudra.

He is beyond good and evil; in him, the apparent defect is a sublime punya. He is not just a man, O Mountain, but God: you cannot judge his nakedness, his parentlessness, or his wildness even, as one does a man. Set aside your dismay and worship Siva. Parvati was born for him: he will have none but your daughter, nor she anyone but him. Surely, you have not forgotten what went before her birth, as if your life began only on that day. Himalaya, long before she was your daughter, Uma was part of Siva's body."

Himavan said, "Muni, the kinnaras who know him and sometimes visit my ranges, say Siva abhors attachment. They say he has absorbed himself in the Brahman to forget Sati. He swore when he married her that he would never marry any other woman. How will my Uma marry this Siva?"

Narada said to him, "Your Parvati was once Daksha's daughter Sati."

And the rishi told of that tragic life, while young Uma's eyes shone. Narada said, "As for the Brahman: though he will not admit it even to himself, Siva waits for Parvati. The Brahman is always with him; he

yearns for his woman. He wants to forget her only because he cannot bear the thought that he will never find her again."

Himavan indulgently picked up Parvati and set her on his throne. Narada said, "Himachala, one day she will have her rightful place again at Siva's side, a higher place than your throne."

Narada went his way. A few days later, in their bedchamber, Mena, who loved Parvati more than her life, said to her husband, "Did you understand what Narada said? I did not. I think we should find a handsome bridegroom from a good family for our child."

Himachala saw tears in his wife's eyes. She fell sobbing at his feet, for fear of what Narada said. Himavan raised her up and drew her to him. "Mena, instead of flailing against destiny, tell your daughter to worship Siva so he will marry her. You heard the muni say that an apparent defect in a person of majesty is no cause of misery as it is in an ordinary man. All that seems inauspicious is not so in Siva."

Mollified, Mena went to Uma to ask her to worship Siva. When Parvati's mother saw her delicate daughter asleep in her bed, she could not bring herself to say what she had come for.

Uma opened her eyes and said with a smile, "Mother, at this hour you must have come to ask me to do tapasya. I had a dream and a holy rishi came to me and told me to worship Siva."

Himavan came into that room. When Mena told him about their daughter's dream, he said, "Dozing off just now, I also had a dream. Siva himself came here as a splendid rishi and Uma went to serve him. We must wait and see what happens."

I first heard of Parvati when she was eight years old. I was still in deep dhyana and I did not believe what I heard: that Sati, who should never have left me, was born again as Himachala's child. It was too soon, too easy. Who could have wrought this miracle when I had combed the three worlds for her spirit and not found my love anywhere? For five years, I ignored what I heard. Even if she had returned, as more and more of the mountain folk were saying, kinnaras, vidyadharas and gandharvas, even some of my own ganas who saw her, I was far from certain that I wanted to see her myself. I had just begun to climb out of the hell of her leaving me. What if she killed herself again? No! The next time there would be no escaping the abyss.

Yet, Sati with a young girl's face would drift into my meditation, a Sati even darker and more beautiful than I remembered. If this was the face of Himavan's daughter, she was my Sati all right. I pitied myself still. I did not have a true perception of the past, the excellent reasons at the heart of the tragedy that had overtaken me. I only felt she had betrayed me, thoughtlessly, out of pique. I did not take the dying promise of such a person seriously and one to whom I had once given myself so irrevocably. I dared not believe that she truly meant to return.

I took the easiest course open to me and possibly the most sensible one for the time being. I convinced myself that love, profound as it was, had been no more than a trial by fire, an obstacle devised to strengthen my tapasya when I lost Sati. I decided I was being shown how evanescent even the greatest love is. Only the Brahman was true: I would never again deviate from my dhyana.

Still, I could not but think of Himachala's little girl about whom I heard so much. And I waited. If she had indeed returned, as she had sworn to, this time it would be for ever. I waited impatiently. One day, I could not bear it any more: I had to know if it was truly she. I could not trust anyone else to decide; I had to see for myself. Just one look would do. Just to know, mind you, no more, even if it was she. I would have nothing to do with her; what does a yogin want with women? I had made a mistake once and I was not about to repeat it.

So I told myself when I set out for Gangavartana with some of my less rambunctious ganas. This was the quietest ridge of the Himalaya to meditate upon and very near Himachala's city, Aushadhiprastha.

I did not announce myself to Himavan. He would hear of my arrival soon enough, for the mountain grapevine is lively. I set myself down, curbing my hopes as if they did not exist and began my dhyana. Nandin, Bhringi and some others meditated at my side. Some ganas served us and others were our sentinels. Not half a day went by, when Himavan came to see me and I could tell he came in some excitement.

"Mahadeva, abode of worlds, obeisance! O Lord, who have come here because my fortune is ascending, today my life has borne fruit. Command me, Rudra, my heart belongs to you."

And more in this vein. I had not yet looked, though I wondered keenly if he had brought his daughter with him. Slowly, as if emerging from deep samadhi, I fluttered my eyes open. I saw he was a great and

kindly being, exactly as I remembered. With a smile, I said, "I have come in secret to your ridges, Mountain. I have come for tapasya. Noble Himavan, refuge of rishis and devas, asuras and gandharvas, O Himachala sanctified by the Ganga: the one service you can do me is to see I am not disturbed at my dhyana."

How could I say to him that I had come to see if his daughter was my Sati? The august mountain said to me, "Lord of the universe, not the devas with their most austere worship attain a vision of you; and you have come here unbidden. There is no one in the three worlds as fortunate as I am. Siva, sit in tapasya undisturbed by any of the mountain folk, for I, Himavan, am your slave."

Though his language was almost obsequious, Himachala's tone was genuinely affectionate and I thought here was a change from Daksha. He came back the next day, bringing fruit and flowers for us all. Before he reached me, my ganas came and whispered, 'She is with him, she is with him!' As carelessly as I could, I said 'Who?' and they did not laugh only out of their habitual reverence for me. I shut my eyes firmly at Himachala's approach and my mind was in tumult. I heard bare feet and the basket of fruit and flowers being set down. Then, his voice a trifle unsteady, I fancied, Himavan said, "Lord, I have brought my daughter Uma and two of her sakhis. They want to serve you."

I did not look up at once and, with an effort, kept my face from twitching. But it had to be done eventually and as if coming out of ineffable dhyana, I opened my eyes languidly. I saw her in the first flush of young womanhood, dark as night, her eyes long as lotus petals, her face bright and mysterious as the moon near fullness, her neck fine, her young breasts like lotus buds, her arms slim and rounded like lily stalks, her waist so unreally slender, her feet perfect, a cascade of curls crowning her body, for which there is no metaphor. I wanted to cry out that she was my Sati. No one could doubt it: my Sati, yet more perfect than she had been, if I dared think such a thought, but it was true.

I snapped my eyes shut. She pierced me through; my body trembled when I looked at her. I set my mouth in a line, as Himavan said, "Siva, if your permit me, I will visit you every morning at this hour and I will bring my daughter Parvati with me. She can serve you through the day and return at night to her mother."

Without opening my eyes again, though only I knew how much I longed to, I said coldly, "Yes, Himachala, you may come every morning to see me. But you will leave your daughter at home."

Her gasp did not escape me. His voice definitely tremulous, her father asked, "Lord, why should the girl not come with me?"

Hoping my voice was not a traitor like his, I said impatiently, "Mountain, I am a yogin. A young woman like your daughter should not be near me. Women are seasons of illusion; worldliness comes from them. They are the very roots of attachment. They are the destroyers of tapasya and I have no use for them."

I wondered if I was ranting and whether he noticed it: especially how I kept my eyes shut, not daring to open them lest seeing her face I lose all control. I spoke firmly, though I knew I hurt his feelings. I could not have her near me; I had almost been lost with one glimpse. He dare not argue, but now she piped up clear as a flute, "O Siva, even you perform tapasya as a yogin only because you possess the vitality for it. My lord, that energy is Prakriti. Woman is Prakriti: the cause of creation, nurture and destruction. Without Prakriti how will the great Lord of the linga exist and be worshipped?"

I had to laugh. I said, "I destroy my Prakriti with tapasya, I am without Prakriti."

She laughed then and oh, I thrilled to that warm, tinkling sound. She said, "Yogin, if you are truly without Prakriti how is it you sit upon this mountain in tapasya? You have been swallowed entire by Prakriti, that you no longer know your own condition. Siva, if you are really beyond Prakriti, why should you fear my being near you?"

In some alarm, Himavan began to make anxious noises to his daughter to stop. I held my hand up at him, to let her speak; after all, she only spoke the truth. I opened my eyes once more. Seeing her, my ascetic resolve vanished like mist at sunrise. I drank thirstily of her loveliness. I sighed, tolerantly, in my best long-suffering manner: though the truth, of course, was that I would have her near me every day, every moment.

Pretending to give in wearily, I said, "Parvati, if you insist you may serve me. I am the Brahman and you can do nothing to perturb my spirit. I allow you to come and go from this place as you please; no one shall hinder you."

Blessing my good fortune, how swiftly it moved, I shut my eyes again. They went back to their city: she promising to return the next day, her father happier than her. I spent an uneasy night. Sati haunted my dhyana, her dead face coalescing with young Parvati's. Were they one person? They felt as if they must be. Was this another cruel joke being played to enchant me and in a few years she would leave me desolate again? Was this a trial of my resolve to remain alone? If it was, I suspected I had already failed the test. For by dawn, I had to admit that seeing her was as vital to me as my tapasya, as crucial as the Parabrahman.

As the sun rose, a vision of terror rose before me, a vision of myself as I had been after Sati died: homeless and demented. No! I would not let that happen again. With a cry, I yoked myself and meditated fiercely on the atman. I sank so deep into myself that, by the time she arrived, I was unaware of my body or its surroundings. Yet, for the first time after Sati's death, I had decided to stay in one place for more than a day.

I would not fall prey again to that most terrible of sins, love. I locked myself away. But she came every day to serve me, while I sat unmoving, unbreathing: adrift on the sea of the atman.

She washed my feet and drank that water. She wiped my insensate body with a cloth she heated over a wood fire. Each day, she worshipped me with sixteen separate and intricate offerings, before she went back to her father's palace late in the evening. Some days, she brought kusa grasses, lotuses and dry twigs for the fire. On others, she and her sakhis got onto their knees and scrubbed the floor of my asrama. On yet other days, she just sat and gazed at my face, as if in wonder that I existed.

She was bewitching, but I had no eyes for her. The time had not yet come when we would be together again. But it was nearer than I knew, as I journeyed in the domain of the spirit. The devas were faced with a crisis that only my marrying Parvati could solve and they decided to take a hand in our fate.

TWENTY-SEVEN

‘Only if Siva has a son’

Brahma's son Marichi sired Kashyapa, who took thirteen of Daksha's daughters to be his wives. Kashyapa's eldest wife, Diti, bore the golden Asuras, Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashyapu, who terrorised the worlds, until Vishnu, as Varaha and Narasimha, slew them and there was peace in creation once more. Diti was inconsolable and she prayed fervently for more children. After an age of worship, she became pregnant again with a mighty child who could kill her sister Aditi's son Indra, the Deva king. When Indra heard of it, he spirited himself into her womb and attacked the foetus with his thunderbolt. By the power of Diti's tapasya, the embryo did not die; it was cut in seven. Diti bore seven sons instead of one and they were the Maruts. Indra took them into the heavens and made them Vayu the Wind's companions.

Again, Diti resorted to her husband with worship and she bore an adamant son called Vajranga. He was born full-grown and as powerful as the greatest deva. At Diti's instance, Vajranga abducted Indra and held him captive. Brahma and Kashyapa interceded for the Deva king and Vajranga released Indra.

Vajranga, who was an innocent, said humbly to Brahma, "Pitama, teach me the essential dharma by which I can achieve happiness. I kidnapped Indra only because my mother told me to: it brought me no joy."

Brahma smiled and created Vajrangi to be Vajranga's wife. The Creator said to the Demon, "Only sattvik feelings can make you joyful. Be happy with your wife."

Vajranga, lord of the asuras, was the most peaceful of Diti's children. Not so his wife. She always said to him, "Give me a son who will conquer the worlds and bring misery to Vishnu."

The pure-hearted Vajranga was distraught. Much as he loathed to, it was his dharma to give his wife what she wanted. He worshipped Brahma, his guru. The Lotus-born One appeared before him in light. Vajranga said,

"Lord, bless me with a son who will be as his mother wants. But for my sake, let him also be a tapasvin."

Brahma said, "So be it."

Vajrangi conceived and for years her pregnancy lasted, while her mysterious child grew slow and strong within her. At last, one night, when thunder crashed, bolts of lightning and comets fell together out of the sky, when meteors flew up into heaven from an earth that shook with giant tremors and the rough wind swept land and sea in hurricanes, uprooted the greatest trees and blew them along like straw puppets; on a night when gales billowed blind with dust, when the sun's haloes were dim with Rahu's ominous shadow, when mountain crevasses resounded with terrifying explosions, when macabre vixens howled and vomited fire in the villages of men, when dogs bayed and their bitches sang dismally, when beasts of the jungle wandered lost and shivering into human habitations, when birds of day wheeled in maddened flocks, darkening the night sky, when cows sprayed blood through their teats in fear and clouds rained faeces down on the world; on a night when in temples and in homes the idols of the Gods appeared to weep and fly up into the air in despair and foreboding, when the planets in the heavens seemed to collide in their orbits: on such a night, in agony, Vajrangi delivered a son with enormous limbs and strength, who dazzled the darkling quarters with his sinister brilliance: as if to declare that they belonged to him from now!

Kashyapa Prajapati named his grandson, that demon child, Taraka. How quickly Vajrangi's son grew, his frame like the Himalaya, his intellect loftier. One day, when he was no longer a child nor yet a man, he went to his mother and said, "I will do tapasya now, if you allow me."

Vajrangi blessed her son and he went off deep into the Madhuvana, Taraka who was already a master of astras and maaya. Even as Vishnu once did, he stood on a single toe of his foot to propitiate Brahma, who was his father's Deity before him, the Pitama who was his own great-grandfather. For a hundred years, Taraka stood unmoving, gazing at the sun, his arms raised heavenwards; for a hundred more, he stood on his hands and worshipped the Creator. For another hundred years, he hung by his feet from a tree above the sacrificial fire, breathing only its smoke. The Asura Taraka's penance lasted a thousand years, until even those who merely heard of it trembled. Then, a mass of light poured from his head and blazed through the sky like an untamed river of the sun.

When that splendour lit up devaloka, Indra cried, "Whose tapasya is this, so awesome that he will usurp my throne, that he will consume the very stars?"

Panic-stricken, when they discovered who the tapasvin was and whom he worshipped, all the maharishis and devas came flying to Brahma. "If you don't give Tarakasura whatever he wants, his tapasya will incinerate the heavens."

Brahma appeared, smiling radiantly, before the lord of asuras. Never before had he been worshipped with a penance like Taraka's. Brahma said, "There is nothing you cannot have, Taraka."

Hands folded, Taraka replied, "If you are truly pleased, Pitama, grant me two boons."

He waited for Brahma to agree and when the Creator nodded his heads, Taraka named his boons. "Let no one in all this universe of yours be my equal in strength. And let me die only at the hands of a son of Siva, who brings an army against me."

Brahma was obliged to give him what he asked. Bowing to the Pitama, Tarakasura went home to Sonitapura, golden capital of the daityas. Spurred on by his ambitious mother, Taraka embarked on his conquest of the worlds. So strong was he by Brahma's boon that no enemy could stand before him: not the devas, not the lokapalas. Quickly, Tarakasura was sovereign of the three worlds, boundlessly benevolent to his own kind, but making the devas' lives a nightmare.

To buy some security for themselves, the devas offered up all their wealth to him. Without his asking, Indra gave him Airavata, Kubera surrendered the nine treasures, the rishis gave sacred Kamadhenu. Varuna gave Taraka horses of foam, swifter than light and Surya brought him the peerless Uchchaisravas. Everything of value in the universe quickly belonged to that great Demon. He expected no less, for his penance had been without precedent. Tarakasura expelled the devas from devaloka, called himself the new Indra and installed his asuras to do the work of the gods. He ruled heaven immaculately: the sun shone mildly for fear of him and the moon never set to please him.

The devas were in miserable exile, powerless and terrified. Though he could not take their lives, he took everything else from them; so their immortality was worthless, a torment and they longed for death.

In despair, they came to Brahma, their father.

"Lord of Creation, Taraka has enslaved the worlds with your boon. He has taken all that was once ours and banished us from our homes. Wherever we are, wherever we flee to, Taraka and his demons come hunting us. Agni, Yama, Varuna, Nivritti, Vayu and all the guardians, every lord of light serves Taraka. They serve him like the commonest slaves.

The Asura keeps our wives and the apsaras in his harem. No yagna is fruitful on any world; no muni sits in tapasya anymore. Taraka has perverted the nature of time. Every stratagem with which we tried to kill him has failed; even Vishnu's Sudarshana chakra fell around his neck like a garland of wildflowers. You blessed him and now he tyrannises us. Pitama, help us, our lives are intolerable."

Brahma sighed. "Because of my boon to him, not Hari, Rudra or I can kill Taraka. Finally his own sins will destroy the Demon, but only when Siva has a son. Daksha's daughter has been reborn as Himavan's child and Rudra will marry only her. By the power of his dhyana, the Yogin's seed flows up to his head, only Parvati can make it flow down into her body. Only she can bear that hiranyaretas in her womb: Siva's blazing golden seed!

Even now, she attends him in Gangavartana, but he resists her. You should persuade him to make her his wife."

Brahma went to devaloka and said to his bhakta Taraka, "Asura, I did not bless you so you could turn the devas out of their heavens. You can rule the worlds well enough from the earth. Return to Sonitapura."

Taraka came back to the earth and the devas went home, in relief, each to his original place. But the Demon was still their master and they received nothing else of value back from him save their empty palaces. Indra sat alone in the Sudharma; his once splendid crystal hall was wan and empty. He called Kamadeva to him. Kama came with Rati and Vasantha. His spirit undimmed by the harsh years of Taraka's rule, since the universe was his to madden with desire still, Kama stood handsome and haughty before his dejected king. He joined his hands in mock reverence and, a smile curving his lips, said, "How may I serve you, my lord?"

"Unequalled Kama, my Vajra may fail, as it has against Taraka, but you, my friend, are a master of the universe still. With your flower arrows and your sugarcane bow with its string of honey-bees, with Rati and Vasantha beside you and the Moon your friend, you can entice Brahma or

Vishnu." Indra paused to lower his voice, "But, Kama, can you enchant Siva into love?"

Kama smiled. He said to his doubting king, "Where your Vajra was blunted, my soft shafts shall pierce. I will swerve Siva from his dhyana and make him fall in love with Uma."

Smiling and bowing before their disconsolate master, the three seducers to love vanished from his forlorn court.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Parvati's tapasya

How does a yogin immersed in the atman know that spring in dangerous color has come clandestinely to his hermitage in the mountains? I was lost to the world, so I did not smell the flowers that burst into bloom on the mango and asoka trees around me. While the mountain folk for leagues around, kinnaras, gandharvas and vidyadharas, were all in rut from the potent season arrived so suddenly, water lilies humming with giddy bees, koyals cooing madly to each other, the moonlight conniving with these to make love irresistible, the scented breeze blowing yearnings of separated lovers and nothing else, through the long nights, even the stones of the earth quickened, I sat inured to that untimely and frantic spring.

I had no warning of Kama's arrival. The mango blossom arrow was ready in his hand. Kama, thief of hearts, enchanting the world on his way, hid himself in some bushes near my grove of absorption. At first, he saw no lacuna in my dhyana through which he could pierce me with his flowery barb. He waited. At dawn, Uma came to the tapovana, with Vasantha, Spring, bewitched by her, trailing her like her shadow!

Kama trembled to see her beauty. At her approach, my meditation grew shallow by instinct; my breathing grew more frequent, more human. She plucked the unnatural spring's wildflowers, wove them into her hair and came and stood before me. I became aware of her scent and with it the scents of the strange season and, puzzled, began to open my eyes. At the ambiguous moment, the Love God, hidden in the shrubbery with Rati, shot me through the heart with his subtle shaft. He stayed there, concealed, to see if he had found his mark.

At first, I felt nothing; nothing was new. Parvati made her offering of fruit and flowers to me. Her eyes averted, but straying to me time and again, she began to wipe my body with a cloth warmed over the fire. Suddenly, I felt a surge in my loins like a bolt of lightning, a shock of desire I had not known since Sati died. I was overwhelmed. She saw what I

felt, clearly in my lap. She gave a moan, the true import of which she hardly realised herself.

I began to babble! "Is this your face or the moon fallen to the earth? Your lips are sweeter than the bimba; the koyal has stolen your voice. Ah, is this your waist or an altar for me to sacrifice myself?"

If I felt like this just looking at her, what would it be to touch her? Before I could stop myself I reached out and pulled her down into my lap, thrust my hand into her clothes and fondled a perfect, virgin breast. But when I tried to kiss her, she drew away from me and in horror, I saw what I was doing. I leapt up and away from her. I roared, "Who dares disturb my tapasya?"

From the corner of my eye, I saw Kama aim another flowery arrow at me. I glared open the eye in my forehead, the third one. A fire leapt from it, burning up Kama's puny missile in flight. Curling and hissing, that fire climbed into the sky. It blazed briefly everywhere and then, like a dreadful misfortune, fell down to the earth again. In a wink, Kama was a mound of ashes.

Uma gave a strangled cry and fled; with a scream, Rati fell senseless in the bushes. When the fire had found its mark and beautiful Kama became ashes, the eye in my brow blinked shut again. With a growl, I stalked out of the accursed grove.

The devas, who had watched all this from the safety of their heights, flew down to Rati's side and revived her. She kicked her legs and pulled her hair; she beat her breast and shrieked. She was ugly, demented by grief.

"Kama, Kama my life, why did you come here? I told you Siva was dangerous. How long did your enchantment last over that terrible heart? A moment! And you are dead. What will I do? O wretched Devas, you sent my love to his death."

She screamed until Indra gathered Kama's ashes in an urn and said sternly to her, "It is Brahma's curse being fulfilled. Keep these ashes carefully: Siva himself will return your husband to you alive. The time of the curse's end has almost come."

After an age, though I could not have said why, I now went back to Kailasa and the devas came there.

"O Sankara, Kama came to you because we sent him. He came though he knew he was in mortal peril. Rati is inconsolable and, Siva,

what will the worlds do without Kama? Love will die."

I said heavily, "You should have come to me yourselves about Taraka. I would have helped you. You chose to use deceit. What has been done cannot be retrieved; but during Krishna's life on earth, Kama will be born as the Blue God and Rukmini's son and he shall be called Pradyumna. Rati will also be born then: in the house of the asura Sambara. And in that life, Rati and Kama will find each other again."

Having promised to return his life to Kama, I grew quiet. The fire from my brow still consumed earth and sky. It was made of the flames of the dissolution and after it ashed Kama, it devoured everything it found. Brahma confronted that fire, raging through his creation. He mastered it and made it burn gently, though now it would burn forever. He gave that quenchless agni the form of a candescent mare and led her to the ocean. Varuna came ashore, where Brahma stood with the beast of flames and he folded his lucent hands to the Pitama.

"Lord of worlds, command me."

Brahma said, "This is the fire of Siva's anger, made of the flames of the end of all things. I have tamed it, but it must feed until time stops. Lord of rivers, only you can contain this fire until the time of the end."

The Ocean led the flaming animal away below his waves. There in the deeps, feeding on submarine currents, that dreadful agni blazes, red and gold, until the day Brahma returns to loose it again upon creation, at the hour of the Apocalypse.

When the fire sprang from my eye there was thunder, as if the sky had been riven. On his mountain throne, Himavan heard it and trembled. Just then, Parvati came running to him in panic: frightened and sobbing. She had seen me walk away from Gangavartana. Himalaya took his daughter onto his lap and called Mena to console her. Uma was inconsolable. Over and over, she cried, "Oh, I am doomed. I curse my beauty; it is in vain. I am doomed, doomed, doomed."

She thought of the days she served me in the sacred grove and called my name ceaselessly. She did not know that she was being tested. I wonder if I knew properly myself what was afoot; I remember thinking that I had escaped disaster by the breadth of a wish. I shuddered to remember the moments when I lost control of myself. Uma suffered terribly, she thought she might never see me again.

Then, timely as always, Narada arrived in Himavan's city. Going straight to Parvati, he said, "Uma, there is only one way for you: worship Siva with a tapasya."

Hope sparked in her desolate spirit. She cried, "Omniscient Rishi, kindly Narada, give me a mantra with which to worship him."

And Narada first taught her the mantra of five syllables. Uma sent her sakhis, Jaya and Vijaya, to her father. They said to the mountain, "Lord, Parvati wants to make her body, her beauty and her family fruitful. Allow her to go to the tapovana."

Himachala said, "If her mother agrees, I am content."

Jaya and Vijaya went to Mena, "Parvati wants to do a penance in the forest to win Siva for her husband. Her father agrees, but bids her seek your consent."

Mena said nothing, but she did not seem pleased. The next morning, Parvati came to her mother. "Mother, I am going to the tapovana to worship Siva. Give me your blessing."

Stifling a sob, Mena said, "Oh Parvati, you are so unhappy! Do tapasya if you must, my child, but do it here at home. All the Murtis are here, all the temples. What did you gain when you left home the last time? It is unheard of: a young girl going to sit in tapasya."

Uma would not relent. At last, though she wept, Mena had to give in to her daughter. The moment her mother gave her consent, Parvati's face lit up; she set out with a few companions for the grove of penance. She no longer wore a princess' finery, but tree-bark, deerskin and a girdle of munja grass. She came to Gangavartana. When she saw the deserted ridge, she bit her lip and cried softly, "Oh, Siva."

Controlling herself quickly and more determined than ever, she began her tapasya. She swept the ground as she used to; she built her own altar in that place. Around the shrine, she planted sacred trees, shrubs and flowering plants and made a proper asrama of it. Then, what a tapasya she began.

In summer, she built a fire around herself and sat at its heart. In the monsoon, she sat exposed to lashing torrents of rain and hail. In winter, she dug a ditch and filled it with freezing water, which often turned to ice. In this she sat, chanting **Namah Sivayah** under her breath without a moment's break, day and night, ignoring snowfall and blizzard. She focused her mind on me, so I felt every moment of her worship, in thrall.

She ate only fruit the first year of her tapasya, only leaves during the second and finally she ate nothing at all: she sustained herself just on my mantra.

When she stopped eating, the devas, who watched her worship fondly and in hope, called her Aparna, the unequalled one. Uma stood on one leg for three thousand years, motionless, with her face turned to the sky. Her hair grew wild and matted. The thought came to her one day, "Isn't Siva aware of my tapasya? Why doesn't he come to me?"

Her time had not come. On she stood, chanting **Namah Sivayah, Namah Sivayah**, until the devas and the rishis marvelled at this fiercest of all penances. It was even greater than Tarakasura's. The celestials came to stand near her. They said, "No tapasya has ever been as like this one and none shall ever be."

Her consummate dhyana continued, while its grace subverted nature around her. Deer and lion came to her asrama and lay side by side, witnesses to her tidal peace, sharing in its swell. The trees and shrubs she once planted grew into a tangled vana around her. Whatever the season, those trees were never bare, or her plants without flowers. They called that place of Uma's matchless worship Sringitirtha and later, Gauri Shikahara.

Himachala came to the tapovana with Mena and Uma's brothers. Shocked when he saw her, her father cried, "Don't torture yourself anymore, no one is worth this. Precious child, you cannot catch the moon in the sky. How will he who burnt the God of love to ashes, ever come in love to you?"

Mena wept when she saw the state in which her daughter was. Her brothers were dismayed: Uma's inhuman tapasya seemed to be in vain. With a wan smile, which broke their hearts, she said quietly to them, "I will fetch him to me in this very place from where he went. I will bring him back with my bhakti."

Then she said no more, but shut her eyes again and by the tiny movements of her lips and her throat, they knew she called her love again endlessly, **Namah Sivayah, Namah Sivayah**. Grief-stricken and helpless, Himachala, Mena and the others went back to their city, so empty now that Parvati, who was its soul, was away. Though they may not have known it clearly, their every moment was a prayer for their daughter.

After her parents' visit, Uma's tapasya became even more fervid. It brought a mystic heat to the worlds, it scorched everyone: the prajapatis,

the guhyakas, the asuras, yakshas, kinnaras, charanas, siddhas, sadhyas, the nagas and the vidyadharas. Parvati's tapasya paled the splendor of their divine bodies. The devas fled to golden Mount Sumeru, to Brahma.

"Pitama, what strange fire is this that cannot be seen? It scathes all the universe."

Brahma took them to Vishnu, who lay on the Serpent upon infinite waters, to find a cure for Parvati's searing penance. Blue Vishnu said, "Let us go to Siva, I think it is time."

The devas demurred. "We dare not go near him, look what he did to Kama."

Laughing, Hari said I would not harm them. They went first to Parvati's asrama. They saw her body exuding in waves the refulgence that heated creation. They bowed to her as she sat unmoving; they prostrated themselves and then they came to Kailasa.

The devas would not come near me. Vishnu and Brahma, who remembered the last time they had come on a similar mission, would not either. Narada was the only one not afraid and they sent him into the cave where I sat among my ganas. The others stood outside at what they thought was a safe remove.

"Obeisance to Siva, obeisance to Kamaghna! Obeisance to the skin-clad Lord, obeisance to three-eyed Mahadeva. Obeisance to Ghora the terrible, who else can make an end to our misery?" said Narada, smiling at Nandin at the door.

Nandin came smiling in to me. "Lord Vishnu and Brahma, all the devas and siddhas are here to see you. But they are not sure if you will see them and wait outside."

I motioned to him to show them in. They came into the cave, shining. I embraced them all and I could feel their relief at finding me affable, after what had happened to Kama.

Hari said, "Siva, only a son of yours can kill Taraka. Himachala's daughter Parvati was born to be your wife and her tapasya to you fires the three worlds. Save us, Sankara: from Taraka's tyranny and Uma's tapasya!"

Keeping my face grave, I said, "It was from Brahma's ancient curse that Kama was made ashes. If I take Uma for my wife, Kama will live again. Though he shall be formless until Krishna is born into the world, his spirit will make creation lustful once more and ruin the tapasya of the worlds. I have cleared all your paths to moksha by burning Kamadeva. I

am a yogin; you should not ask me to marry Parvati. Men bound with shackles of iron can free themselves, but where is the escape from the bonds of women?"

I shut my eyes on them and gently, on a slow breeze of the spirit, I drifted into the tracklessness of the atman. In one voice, they cried to me, "Sambhu, only you can save us! Siva, don't desert us in our crisis."

I thought they had begged enough and waited long enough; truth to tell, so had I. I was desperate for Parvati: I yearned for her more than she did for me. I longed for her nearness, her love as deep as the ocean of Brahman. As if I was doing them a great service and making the profoundest sacrifice, I said wearily to the Gods, "Very well, I will consider what you have said. But first, we must test Parvati's bhakti sternly. All of you know what happened the last time I married at your insistence."

TWENTY-NINE

The Jatila and the Sunartaka

Even I, who am always a yogin, marvelled at her tapasya. It was so passionate, immaculate, that I was distracted from my own dhyana. How can any God ignore such worship? And now, though our time had come, I must, as Vishnu observed, proceed cautiously. I thought of the Saptarishi and Marichi, Atri, Angiras, Pulastya, Pulaha, Kratu and Vasishta stood beaming before me that I had summoned them. "Lord of Gods, Ocean of mercy, we are blessed that you thought of us. Command us, we are your slaves."

I laughed, I fear, as I often do at their earnestness. More kindly, I said, "O perfectly wise ones, my benefactors all! Parvati sits in tapasya at Gauri Shikahara to make me her husband. Go and test her resolve, use all your considerable wit."

They went to where Uma stood motionless, her dhyana streaming from her like flares from a sun. When they came near, she welcomed them serenely. Vasishta said, "Parvati, for what is your tapasya?"

Uma smiled bashfully and replied, "Rishis, you will laugh if I tell you."

They insisted. "You must tell us."

She said, "At Narada's bidding, I am chanting Siva's name so he will become my husband."

The rishis laughed raucously. Kratu said, "Your tapasya is at Narada's bidding? Don't you know he is a prankster? Haven't you heard how he became an eternal wanderer? Daksha cursed Narada when he sent his brother's sons to discover the ends of the universe. An enterprise not unlike your own! I can understand a tapasya to win anyone else for a husband. But Siva! The yogin has no feelings. He is filthy, shameless and naked, of no pedigree, ugly and surrounded by ghouls and goblins. What a dreadful bridegroom he would make a beautiful child like you. Ah, Parvati, Narada has cheated you."

Atri chimed in, "Even if Siva were to marry you, don't you know what happened to Sati? He abandoned her in a few months, sent her back

to her father. He is a solitary. He is after moksha, what will he do with you?"

For good measure, Vasishta added, "Vishnu is the husband for you. How handsome he is and such a lover. Narayana will make you happy."

They all said, "Don't be obstinate, Uma, we will get you married to Hari."

Parvati laughed softly and said with dignity, "By your light and wisdom, Munis, you speak truly. But remember I am a mountain's daughter and my obstinacy is congenital. Undoubtedly, Vishnu is wonderful: but he is not for me. Not if the sun rose in the west, not if Mount Meru moved from his place, not if Agni grew cold as ice, or the lotus bloomed out of a rock, will I change my mind. Brahmarishis, if Siva does not marry me I will remain a virgin."

The rishis came back to me and said Uma was the purest of the pure and if I did not believe them, I should test her devotion for myself. So I must; I went to her for the first time since she began her tapasya. But I did not go as myself. For a last examination of her intentions, I went to her asrama in the guise of a Jatila. I assumed an old brahmana's form, bright, with a round shining face, jata and leaning on a staff and carrying an umbrella as old and worn as my disguise, I went to Uma.

She was before me at last and I swore I would not let her away again. When she saw the splendid brahmachari, she came out to meet him with every ceremony. She felt a special affection for this saint, she could not tell why. When she had made the Jatila comfortable in her asrama, she said, "Who are you, Master, who light up my tapovana?"

Knitting my brows, as if she was the strangest thing I had ever seen, I said in the Jatila's voice, "I am just an old brahmana who roams the world trying to help anyone I can. But who are you, perfect young woman? Who is your father, which is your family? Isn't it perverse for an obviously blessed young woman like you to be a tapasvin at your time of life? Has your husband left you?"

Then, after a brief pause to drink in her beauty, "But you are not an ordinary young woman. Tell me, who are you? Lakshmi! No? Saraswati, then?"

She laughed and then told me all about herself: she felt she must, though she did not know why. "I am not Lakshmi or Saraswati, Jatila. I am Himachala's daughter Parvati. I was once Daksha's daughter Sati and I was

someone's wife. But when my father mocked my husband, I killed myself to be born of a nobler blood. In this life, too, my love came to me. Then, by my misfortune, he blazed Kama to ashes with fire from his eye and went away. I came to the holy river to worship him and bring him back."

She stopped and bit her lip. The smile faded from her face and there was such sorrow in its place. Then, she smiled bravely again. "But my tapasya has failed, Jatila. He is not pleased with me. When you arrived, I was about to make myself ashes in the yagna fire. Now that you are here you can watch me and tell the world my story. I will be born a million times and for a million lives woo him with worship: if that is what it takes to win him!"

The Jatila lunged forward to stop her, but she had walked into the fire and it raged over her head. With a hiss, the flames died around her. The Jatila laughed, "You are an extraordinary young woman! Your tapasya is powerful enough to extinguish a fire, but your desire remains unfulfilled. Who do you pray for to be your husband? In whose name do you forsake unearthly beauty like yours and deprave your young life where it does not belong? Your penance is such that you could have any of the devas, even Vishnu I should think. Tell me, tell me: for I am a bestower of boons. I make the strangest wishes come true."

Despairing for her mistress, her sakhi Vijaya said, "She wants Siva for her husband."

The Jatila jumped as if a scorpion had stung him; he howled in surprise. He wagged his finger at Vijaya and began to laugh, "Ah, you joke with an old man."

Parvati broke in, "There is no joke, Jatila, what she says is true."

He stared at her for a long moment; then, with a sigh, he rose, shaking his head sadly. The Jatila said, "I must leave."

Parvati cried, "You must help me, Muni!"

He said grimly, "Having heard what your tapasya is for, I have no use for your further friendship. I must be on my way."

He began to walk away, but in desperation and she could not have said why, Uma fell at his feet. "Kindly Rishi, help me, you are my last hope!"

The Jatila sighed again and raised her up. "Very well. Since you stop me with bhakti, I will stay. Since you ask me so humbly, I will speak. I know Siva better than anyone does. He is not a normal man. He has a bull

on his banner and that bull is all he has. What is more, he does not care that he is so. You smear your tender body with sandal paste; he coats his with ashes from the burning ghat. You wear fine silks; he wears an elephant's hide when he does wear anything. You adorn yourself with gold and jewels; he drapes himself with serpents. He has no education, no guru, why, he has no origin, or parents that anyone knows of.

He has ten arms, Parvati and hideous bhutas and pretas are his only friends apart from the bull. He eats anything, including meat of any kind. He has three eyes and venom in his throat. You wear a necklace of pearls, he wears one of skulls..."

As he went on, the Jatila's tirade grew more spiteful. Suddenly, as if his words had pierced her like the barbs of battle, Parvati stopped her ears with her hands and him with an angry cry. "Wretch! Why did I honour you? You are worthy of killing. You dare speak like this of Siva, the origin of the universe. Siva who gave the Vedas to Vishnu as prana at the beginning of the kalpa, Siva who is the father of Prakriti, Siva in whom everything is auspicious, Siva the changeless, Siva from whose body the devas collect the fallen ashes to wear on their heads, Siva whose mere name confers moksha, Siva the formless and of endless forms! Don't you know, you fool, that speaking ill of Siva will ruin all the punya you have?"

The Jatila opened his mouth to speak, but Parvati screamed, "Vijaya, stop the brahmana or he will say more! Let no one talk to the fool. Come, let us leave: to stay here will be to court death."

She turned away, but I caught the sleeve of her garment. Vijaya and the others gasped, because I was the Jatila no more, but myself again. Uma still had her face turned from me. She cried, "Let me go!"

I said, "Where will you go without me?"

Hearing the change in my voice, she turned. Such an unforgettable smile broke on her wan face. Gazing into her eyes, I said, "I will not let you go now. I am your slave by your tapasya, by your beauty. Every moment with you is as deep as a yuga. Tell me what you want, you can have anything from me. Parvati, come with me to Kailasa, let us have no more pretence between us. Ask for your vara!"

She smiled and said, "You be my Vara."

I took her hand. I wanted her, at once, as I had never wanted anything. But she said, "Siva, you and I were husband and wife once before. But my father Daksha did not worship the planets at our wedding

and there was a tragic defect in our marriage. Let no flaw ruin our love now. Go to my father Himalaya and beg me for your wife. Siva, let this be for ever."

I knew she was right, this time everything must be perfect. And it was little enough to ask after the merciless way in which I had tried her. I went back to Kailasa to tell Nandin and the others what had happened. I went with my heart singing: there was no one in creation as happy as I was.

After her years of tapasya, Uma came home and what a welcome she had from her parents and her brothers. With a huge entourage, the whole city turned out, Himavan and Mena went to the gates of Aushadipura to receive their daughter. Earth and sky echoed with Mainaka and the others shouting 'Jaya!' as they danced in the streets. The sacred water-pot stood in the main highway, adorned with aguru, sandal, musk, incense and branches of fruit trees. On elephants came the high priests, with dancing girls weaving graceful rhythms around them; all the mountain people came, carrying a million lamps of their joy. The brahmanas chanted Vedic mantras, conches boomed through that city and music like an ocean swelled from vinas, nadaswarams and every other instrument. The roll of drums was endless thunder.

When she saw her daughter, Mena ran to her with a cry and clasped her in her arms, kissing her repeatedly. She stroked her hair and hugged her as if to press Uma back into her body so she would never leave again. She gave her up only when Himavan took her from her mother's arms and embraced her himself, sobbing like a great child. They set Parvati in a shining chariot and drove her in triumph through Aushadipura. The heralds cried, "You are the saviour of your family: Uma of the incredible deed!"

They showered her with petals and not all of them were from flowers of the earth. The devas had congregated above in their vimanas, Uma was their hope and saviour too. The ones of light rained down unworldly blooms, they sang Parvati's praises when she came home. Their songs echoed in heaven and apsaras danced on fleecy cloud platforms. Uma's sisters-in-law gave her the ritual bath after her triumphant tapasya, washing away the dirt of years. Himavan declared a celebration and he went to the Ganga to purify himself for the ceremony.

Such a feast Himalaya held in his capital when his daughter Kaali came home. I missed her so much that I decided to attend the extravaganza. Why waste any more time, I thought, when the task on hand was auspicious? Being a dancer myself, I went singing and dancing to the mountain's court, while he was still at the river. I held a blowing horn in my left hand and a dumaru in my right. I wore a bright crimson sash round my waist and a leather wallet at my back.

Not knowing me and light-headed for joy, Mena cried, "Sunartaka, come dance for us!"

My dumaru burst into life. I sang for them, I took their breath away with my dancing: they had never seen such nritya! All Aushadipura gathered round me, entranced, Mena as well. They were quiet when I danced my little tandava, as if they had seen it before, but could not tell where. I danced the Beginning, I danced the End and I danced the dance between; because, of course, I am Nataraja, always a dancer. But they did not know me; none except Parvati, who fell senseless. She saw the Dance beyond my dancing. She alone saw the dancer as he truly was and ancient ecstasy overwhelmed Uma.

Mena brought a golden urn full of the rarest jewels to offer the Sunartaka of genius. I danced on. She said, "Don't you see the alms I've brought for you, Sunartaka? Or don't you know their value?"

I stopped dancing. I said, "These baubles are not the alms I came for. My dance, lady, is not cheap."

Mena laughed tolerantly. She said before the crowd, "I am happy today, because my daughter has come back to me. Sunartaka, tell me what you want as alms and it shall be yours."

My dumaru chattered a starry rhythm. I sang again, I danced again. I sang to the mountain's wife, "Lady, it is your daughter I want as alms."

Silence fell, louder than the noises of the crowd, louder than my dumaru and my song. Mena's face grew dark, she cried, "Throw him out at once!"

As they hustled me towards the city gates, Himavan returned from his bath in the Ganga. Mena was beside herself at the Sunartaka's impertinence. She told her husband what had happened: how Parvati had fainted and been carried to her chambers, how the knavish dancer had asked for Uma as his alms. Himalaya favoured me with a formidable glare. He thundered, "Throw the upstart out!"

But suddenly, the dancer was too hot for the mountain's guards to hold: his body burned their hands. Now, Himachala and his wife saw before them not the gyrating Sunartaka, but the cosmic forms of Brahma, five-faced and red, intoning the original Veda; and Mahavishnu, four-armed and blue; and Surya, eye of the universe. They saw Rudra and, at his side already, their daughter Uma! Then, they saw me formless, Nirguna and then again just the dancer, begging for their daughter as alms. As great bhakti swept over the mountain couple, the Sunartaka vanished, without their guards having to throw him out of the gates of Aushadipura. Only the resonant chatter of the dumaru still echoed in their minds.

Himachala and Mena cried together, "It was Siva!"

Bhakti grew in them like a storm. The devas said, "If Himalaya gives his daughter to Siva with such devotion, he will have moksha and disappear from the land of Bharata. The earth will not be ratnagarbha anymore, for the rarest, most precious jewels in the world are formed only in Himavan."

The devas went to Brihaspati, their guru. "Master, you must see that Himavan gives his daughter to Siva with some reservation. Or he will attain Sivaloka and the earth will be without treasures."

Brihaspati was furious at the suggestion. He shut his ears with his palms and cried, "Of all the created, you devas are the most selfish. If I disparage Siva to Himavan I will find hell for myself." Then, since he was their guru, he said, "Go to Brahma, he might help you."

Brahma said to them, "I will not risk my life. But why don't you go to Siva and ask him to help you? After all, to slander oneself is not sinful but praiseworthy."

They came to Kailasa, all Indra's folk of light. "Siva, Ocean of mercy, Saviour of your devotees! Rudra, destroyer of misery, if Himavan gives Parvati to you with such devotion, he will leave the world by your grace. And the earth will be without her most precious jewels."

I had to smile at their forthright self-seeking. I said, "How shall I help you?"

Hands folded and shrewd enough to see I was so pleased that he was in no danger, Indra said, "Lord, no one will disparage you to the mountain. We beg you to do it yourself."

How could I refuse? I blessed them a little doubtfully and then sought out Himalaya, who was in his court with Mena and Uma. Helping the devas with their curious problem would take me near Parvati again, which is where I yearned to be since I had vanished from her father's gates. I went again Aushadipura, whose air was crisp and its cedars fragrant. Now I went as a brahmana, with a staff and a parasol, wearing fine silk, a shining white tilaka on my forehead, a string of crystal beads in my hands and a shaligrama stone hung from my neck. I went chanting, 'Narayana, Narayana, Narayana.'

Himavan rose to welcome me. He made the customary offering of madhuparka: honey, butter and sugar, curd and water. Uma saw through the brahmana at once; she smiled and was quiet. She thought I had come to ask for her hand, or she was just glad to see me. Himalaya said, "Tell us who you are, great Muni."

I said, "I am a Vishnubhakta and a scholar. I am itinerant and my work is of a matchmaker."

Mena's eyes shone with interest, as any mother's might at the mention of that vocation. I continued grandly, "I go where I will, I go everywhere. With my guru's blessing, I am omniscient. I am a simple man, O Mountain and I help the needy: that is why I have come to your court."

Himavan's brow wrinkled. I could almost hear his thought: 'Perhaps I can send this brahmana to Siva as my messenger.'

Now, staring straight at Uma, who looked shyly down at the floor, the brahmana said, "I heard you mean to give your tender, lotus-like daughter to Siva and I came here in amazement. How can you even think of such a match? Siva has no friends, he is deformed, he has no qualities, he lives in a cemetery, he looks like a snake charmer, he is naked half the time: a yogin, no householder he! Haven't you heard what he did with his first wife? He is homeless; no one knows his age. Have you seen his filthy jata and the snakes around his neck and his ghosts and goblins? How can you think of this flower of a child with that heretic who mocks the Vedic path? How can you dream of giving this jewel of a young woman to Siva who cannot boast of a single relative? Himalaya, people will laugh at you. If you don't believe what I say ask any of your own relatives, except your daughter who I fear is touched in the head."

For a moment, the brahmana stood glaring defiantly at the court of the mountain. Then, as if there could be no retort to the truths he had told, he turned on his heel and walked out. Mena ran crying from the sabha. Himalaya followed her into their apartment, where his wife wept in shuddering sobs.

"I will not give my daughter to Siva!" she howled. "I will die first, or I will tie her to me with a rope and go into the deepest jungle. I will drown myself."

She pulled her hair, snapped her necklace and shrieked. She lay wailing on the floor. The brahmana's work had been well done. Poor Himavan stood wringing his hands and the delight of the devas in heaven was boundless.

But what about me? After the Vishnubhakta's tirade, the mountain and his Mena would certainly not agree to let Uma marry me. I needed respectable help to restore my prospects. I invoked my friends, the Saptarishi, again and they stood goggling before me that I had summoned them twice in such a short time.

"Sadasiva, a vision of you is sight to the blind, speech to the dumb, a child to the barren. Standing before you today, all our tapasya is fruitful. We are your slaves, Sankara: command us and we will serve you gratefully."

I saw they were nervous, lest I ask them to do something dangerous for me. I said, "Greatest among rishis! I want Parvati for my wife, but for the devas' sake, I prejudiced her parents' minds against myself. You seven must go to Aushadipura and remedy this."

Prostrating, saying how honoured they were to be of service, they flew off to the mountain's city, where they had not been before. I hoped they outranked the Vishnubhakta sufficiently to change Mena's mind.

By the aerial paths, skyways of light, the Saptarishi came to Aushadipura. They saw the streets paved with jewels and great slabs of rock from the sun and the moon and gemstones from the navagraha. They marvelled that the lakes and gardens of that city were finer than those in Indra's Amravati were. They wondered that the men of this place were nobler than devas and their women like apsaras among the glowing trees that grew here. They said to each other, "No wonder they say that men are eager to attain devaloka only as long as they do not see Aushadipura on earth."

"If indeed this place is on earth."

When Himachala saw the shining seven fly down the heavenly airway, he ran out to welcome them. The Saptarishi descended on Himachala's capital in style sufficient to awe the people: they stepped straight out of the sky. The mountain fell at their feet; they raised him up and embraced him. After the rituals of welcome, the sages were shown to exalted places in Himalaya's court.

The august mountain said, "I am blessed that you have come here, Maharishis. Perfect ones, tell your servant what task you have for me."

Vasishta said gravely, "Mountain, Siva is the father of the universe and your daughter Uma is its mother. When you give Sivaa to Siva, you will become the most venerable person in creation. Do not delay."

His voice quavering, Himachala said, "I have long cherished this desire myself, Rishis, nothing has been dearer to my heart. But less than a week ago, a saintly Vishnubhakta came to my court and spoke damagingly of Siva. Since then, my wife is like a woman who has lost her mind. I fear nothing will induce her to give our Kaali to Siva. Mena has shut herself in the krodhagraha, the chamber of anger and remains there without bathing or eating."

He paused then and looked guiltily down at the floor. Impelled by the Saptarishi's piercing gazes, he confessed sadly, "Amsas of Vishnu, I too am loath to give my Parvati to a mendicant."

Silence fell. Then, the rishis who had wisely thought of bringing Vasishta's peerless wife, Arundhati, with them, sent her to speak to Mena. In the chamber of sorrow, Mena lay coiled in grief. Parvati sat consoling her, stricken herself, but faithful and brave. Arundhati placed a hand on Mena's brow. She said, "Mena, arise. The Saptarishi have come to your house, as have I, Arundhati."

Surprised, Mena rose and bowed to the muni's wife, who was as radiant in that dim chamber as Lakshmi. Arundhati said, "Mena, you do not know the devas begged Siva to have a son to kill Tarakasura. Brahma and Vishnu implored him, but he said that only if his Sati returned would he marry again. You also worshipped the Devi asking her to be born as your daughter to become Siva's wife. Then Uma sat in her tapasya like the worlds have never seen and Siva came to her and gave her his word that he would be her husband. Mena, why do you want to forsake destiny now?"

Mena trembled. She said, "Siva is a lone man. He has no wealth, he is not royal, only a sannyasi. How can I give my Parvati to such a one?"

Arundhati put an arm around her. Vasishta's gracious wife said, "How can Siva be poor, when Kubera is his servant? Yet, how can Siva, who is the beginning, the middle and the end of all things, be merely a king, or judged as one? Mena, this is not an ordinary man, that you can judge him by the standards of the world. It is of Sadasiva, who dwells in all of us, of God Almighty, that we speak."

Just hearing these words, by the other woman's tone, or because the time had come and the stars in heaven softened her from that moment, Mena's doubts melted like darkness at dawn. She came out from the chamber of anger with Arundhati and a radiant Uma.

But in Himalaya's hall, the mountain was not convinced that he should have Siva for his son-in-law. Then, Vasishta told the tale of Aranya in that court, Aranya who would not give his daughter Padma to Pippalada, who was once an avatara of Rudra.

THIRTY

Preparations for a wedding

Vasishta said, "Once, in another dim kalpa, the Asura Vritra repeatedly routed Indra and the devas in battle. As always, they went to Brahma for consolation and advice.

Brahma said to them, 'Tvashtar created this Vritra to test you devas and the Demon has Siva's blessing. Once, Dadichi performed a tapasya and Siva blessed him with bones of adamant. If you ask Dadichi for his bones, he will not refuse and if you make yourselves weapons from those bones, you will vanquish Vritrasura.'

The devas went to Dadichi's asrama where the rishi lived with his wife Survacha. When he saw them coming, Dadichi sent Survacha into the dwelling, because he already knew and did not want her to hear, what they had come for. He made the celestials welcome and, bowing low, Indra said piteously, "We cannot defeat Tvashtar's Demon. Brahma says Vritra can only be killed with weapons made from your bones. Help us, Dadichi, or we perish."

Dadichi gave up his body for the devas. He ashed himself with Siva's name on his lips and, absolved of all his karma, attained Brahmaloaka. Indra called Surabhi, the divine cow, to lick up the marrow from the rishi's bones. Then, from Dadichi's adamantine backbone, Viswakarma fashioned a thunderbolt called the Vajra, a bow and quiver of arrows for Indra and the inexorable astra Brahmasiras. The bones of Dadichi shone like Siva himself and Indra lopped off Vritra's head with his Vajra of a thousand jagged joints.

When Survacha came out of her home, she found her husband's smoking remains. She cursed the devas, who by then had left the asrama, "Selfish and manipulative Devas, I curse you to become beasts one day!"

She built a pyre for herself with dry branches from the forest; she wanted to be with her husband. As she was about enter the flames, a disembodied voice spoke to her. "Survacha, you are with child and Rudra himself will be born from your womb. Brahma's law is that a pregnant woman shall not commit sati."

Survacha cut her belly open with a sharp stone and saw a baby inside who lit up the world with his lustre. Survacha bowed to her son, she said, "O Siva, stay under this pipal tree and let me go to my Dadichi in heaven."

She yoked the yogic fire upon herself and escaped the mortal coil. Vishnu and Brahma came to that tree, which was the resplendent infant's father now. The gandharvas and slant-eyed kinnaras, the devas and apsaras came there, with prayer, song and dance. Brahma named the child Pippalada: the son of the pipal tree. The holy child sat in tapasya for a lifetime at the foot of the ancient tree.

The great king Aranya, a Sivabhakta, ruled the seven continents. O Himalaya, O Mena, he too had a hundred sons and just one daughter called Padma, who was an amsa of Durga; and he loved her more dearly than his sons. The girl grew into an exquisite young woman and Aranya sent word through his vast lands to find a suitable bridegroom for his daughter.

Pippalada, the tapasvin, who lived in the vana with his foster-father, the pipal tree, was now an old man. One day, he was walking alone in the jungle when he had an earthy revelation. In a grove of mango trees, for the first time in his life, he saw a gandharva and a vetali making love. The gandharva was a master of the erotic art and Pippalada stood hidden while, in piquant posture after posture, the lucent Elf embraced the dark forest woman who had captured his fancy. The innocent incarnation watched them, spellbound by the gandharva's thrusting, the woman's enraptured cries, as her fingers raked her lover's back. Pippalada stood transfixed and destiny called out to him in a new and carnal voice.

No more could the son of the tree pursue his dhyana. His innocence was ruined; now he wanted a woman himself. The bright gandharva and his dusky mistress haunted his waking and sleep. Pippalada heard that woman panting in his ear; he saw her arched back supported by the lustful gandharva's hand; he saw the sweat shining on her black skin: and he could not sleep. But the images of the vetali were to be soon replaced by dreams of another.

In these same days, of his heart's tempest, Pippalada once went to the river Puspabhadra to bathe. There he saw Aranya's daughter, Padma, bathing naked. He was struck by love's vajra. Pippalada approached the princess' sakhis, "Who is this girl?"

Afraid of the wild old sage, lest he curse them, Padma's companions replied, "She is Padma, the daughter of Aranya, Emperor of the seven

continents."

Pippalada decided Padma was the woman for him. He prayed to Siva, bathed in the river and arrived in Aranya's court as if to seek alms. When he saw the strange ascetic, the king was seized by inexplicable reverence; he offered the visitor madhuparka and worshipped him. When Aranya asked the rishi what he could offer him as alms, Pippalada replied coolly, "Your daughter Padma."

Aranya was too shocked to respond. Eyes on fire, Pippalada said softly, "If you don't give her to me at once, arrogant Kshatriya, I will burn your sabha to ashes."

Aranya's five queens fainted. There was an uproar in his court: surely, they cried, this old brahmana is not the groom for our princess. The king summoned his guru and his priest. They took one look at Pippalada and, bowing low to the visitor, pronounced, "Padma will not find a better husband in the three worlds."

Aranya was the unhappiest man on earth, but he had to yield. He adorned his daughter in finery and jewels and gave her, brilliant and enchanting, to Pippalada. His heart broken, Aranya relinquished his kingdom and went away to the wilderness to sit in tapasya. Padma's mother died of sorrow when her child and her husband both left her. Aranya's son Kirtiman ruled wisely over his father's kingdom and his family flourished for a hundred generations. Finally, Aranya, who sat worshipping Siva, saw in a dazzling vision who it really was his daughter had married. And he found peace and Sivaloka."

Vasishta's tale was so close to Himavan and Mena's lives. The mountain said to his kinsmen, "O Meru, Sahya, Gandhamadana, Mandara, Mainaka, Vindhya, consider what I should do now. Consider well, for Uma is as much your child as she is mine."

Arundhati said quietly, "And if you do not give her freely to Siva, she will go to him anyway. For in his every birth, she is born to be his wife."

The mountains said, "Uma is born for Siva and to Siva she must be given."

A weight lifted from Himachala's heart and when Mena also nodded her assent, he smiled like the sun breaking from behind grim clouds. The mountain bowed to the Saptarishi and Mena went in to the royal kitchen to

prepare a feast for them and to end her own fast. Himavan said, "Deep in my heart I have always known that everything I own belongs to Siva; but time deluded me. August Rishis, find an auspicious lagna and muhurta for the wedding."

The rishis smeared the mountain's moustache with turmeric and saffron. Happily, they said, "Himalaya, Siva is the mendicant, you are the almsgiver and Parvati is the alms. You and yours shall be blessed for ever."

They blessed a radiant Parvati, whose tapasya seemed finally to be over. "Be pleasing to Siva and like the moon waxing your beauty and your virtue will increase."

The Saptarishi came back to me, beaming. They announced, "Lord, prepare for the wedding."

I said honestly, "Tell me about a wedding, for I have forgotten."

They laughed. Kratu said, "Let Vishnu and his people, Brahma and his sons, Indra and his devas, all the rishis, the gandharvas, kinnaras, yakshas, siddhas, vidyadharas, apsaras and nagas be part of your train, immortal Siva. They will tell you about weddings better than we can."

Meanwhile, in a brighter mood than he had known since the Vishnubhakta's visit, Himalaya called his priest Garga and asked him to write me a formal letter of betrothal. He sent the letter to Kailasa with some of his people, along with the customary gifts. They brought me homage and marked my brow with the vermilion tilaka. I received them with honour and made them welcome as any groom might his bride-to-be's relatives. I was enjoying this and, most important, all of it had an auspicious air.

Himalaya was pleased when his messengers returned and told him how gracefully they had been received and how warmly his letter taken. He sent out invitations to his relatives, informing them of the wedding date. In right earnest now, Himavan prepared himself for the ceremony and the feast. Hills of rice, beaten rice and jaggery, sugar sweets and salt were heaped in Aushadipura. Vessels big as hillocks were made for milk and ghee, barley cakes, sugarcane juice, butter and spirits, several of these. Pickles and dishes of meat were cooked for my ganas and for some others too! The cooks were superb and they worked night and day. There were a hundred different kinds of rice, not to speak of other delicacies. It was the feast to end all feasts.

They collected the most breathtaking jewellery for Parvati: everything she had ever been given and some priceless new ornaments besides. That most auspicious morning, they bathed her in milk, the brahmana women of Aushadipura, clad in finery, dripping gold and rubies and diamonds □ this was the day of days. Such rituals, such celebrations in the cities of the mountain; when the time came, it seemed both Himavan and his wife had no reservation left. In fact, their joy was deeper than it had ever been. The mood of bhakti was upon them again, the condition the devas feared would bestow moksha on Himalaya. Yes, Himalaya at least had no doubts anymore.

A few days before the event, the guests began to arrive with their retinues of wives, children and attendants. Mandara, chief of mountains, came in a divine form, towering and refulgent, golden-winged, bearing undreamed-of jewels for the bride and her family. Asta and Udaya came, sunset and sunrise Mountains, from west and east, with glittering gifts. Malaya came from the south, brilliant; Dardura and Nishada came with attendant peaks, bringing treasures for the bride. Gandhamadana came, fragrant and radiant, with his exotic family; Karavira and Mahendra came and Pariyatra and Krauncha with a retinue of peaks. Purushottama, Nila, Trikuta, Chitrakuta, Venkata, Srigiri, Gokamukha and Narada came; Vindhya, with treasures; Kalanjara and sacred Kailasa came and distant, unheard-of mountains from the seven continents, whom Himachala had invited. Awesome and august, colourful and strange, they came to Parvati's wedding in Bharata Varsha.

The great rivers came, embodied and lucent, to Uma's wedding. Sonabhadra was there, rippling; wave-bodied Godavari; dark Yamuna; wise Saraswati; crystal Ganga wearing ineffable ornaments, ravishing Goddess; and Narmada, bewitching. So vast were the pandals, their canopies hid the sun above the city. So colourful were the banners and flags over Aushadipura, they shimmered from afar like galaxies.

The roads of that city were swept and washed with care: even like the inside of a home. At every door, plantain stumps were tied with silken cords, festooned with mango flowers and draped with wild jasmine garlands. Viswakarma himself was called to create the dais, which some said was ten thousand yojanas wide. And within that marvellous pandal was everything in creation, high and low, mobile and unmoving: magically replicated in miniature by the supernal artisan. There were lions; there

were storks and peacocks. In places, the experts could not tell where water was and where solid ground. Viswakarma's models were hardly short of Brahma's creation.

The make-believe apsaras danced with barely unreal men, enchanting them. No one could tell by looking at them, or even by touching them, whether they were living or not. At the entrances were fierce dwarapalakas with bows in their hands, fitted with arrows. There were elephants with their mahouts, horses with bright riders, chariots and foot soldiers: all unreal, all lifelike. Mahalakshmi at the main entrance was perfect, so she seemed to have risen just then from the Kshirasagara. Beyond her, Nandin looked more himself than the real Nandin who was with me on Kailasa. Above the dais of mythic size, flew a pushpaka vimana, ship of heaven, all the devas in it.

Viswakarma had replicated everyone important with his art. He had made the lokapalas in the sky with secret jewels of power shining in their hands, Indra mounted on Airavata, Bhṛigu and the rishis, Mahaviṣṇu himself, Anantasayanam and Brahma Pitama with the Vedas in his hands, surrounded by his sons the first munis.

For the devas and the others, Viswakarma wrought miraculous environs in Aushadipura. For Brahma there were seven shimmering palaces, for Hari there was a Vaikunta, for me a Sivaloka, so like the original one, with evanescent mansions that were always subtly changing their forms. There were palaces for all the others, as well: made for them individually so each one would be in familiar surroundings. Nothing like Himachala's new city for his guests, it was no less than a city, had ever been built in this world. Amidst abandoned festivity, they waited eagerly for the bridegroom and his party to arrive.

When I received the letter of betrothal from the mountain, confirming a date for the wedding, I had it read aloud in my assembly of ganas. I feted Himavan's messengers and cried, "Everything is auspicious: the date, the time and the woman. I accept the proposal of marriage, you shall all come to my wedding!"

Then I called Narada to share my joy and he materialised smiling on Kailasa as soon as I thought of him. I embraced the muni when he prostrated at my feet. I said happily, "Narada, I am a slave to Uma's bhakti. In seven days, I will marry her in her father's city."

He cried, "Dearest Lord, I am your servant: command me!"

"Maharishi, on my behalf, invite all the devas, from Hari down; invite the rishis, the siddhas and the rest. Tell them to come with their women, children and their families to Kailasa for a celebration. Tell them those that do not come are no longer my people, whether they are gods or not."

He went abroad by the wondrous airways, that lightning traveller and made the invitations himself. Then he came back to Kailasa and stayed near me until the day of moment. Vishnu was the first to arrive; he came as soon as he heard the news. Soon, the others began to pour in, in grandeur. Everyone came, save poor Kama.

The apsaras danced for us, the gandharvas sang and we drank and smoked ganja from earthen chillums. For two days, we revelled without pause, when Vishnu declared, "It is time to leave. We must be early for the celebrations in Aushadipura."

I put on my best face and they said every feature of mine was an ornament. I did not want to disappoint Uma or her parents. The seven mothers of heaven dressed me up for the occasion, as if I was their son. Soma was my crown, silver streak in my jata. The eye in my brow became a gemstone; my serpents turned themselves into jewelled earrings and necklaces. The ashes on my body were sweet unguents, my old elephant-hide from the Demon Gajasura transformed itself into a magnificent silken garment, worthy of a bridegroom like me. When they saw me ready for the journey, of no return, they sighed. The devas cried, "Sadasiva, bless us!"

I was pleased. Vishnu said, "Siva, let every ritual be performed meticulously by the laws of the grahya sutras: so this time there is no error."

I agreed happily, "So be it."

With Vishnu at my elbow, I sat before Kashyapa, Atri, Vasishta, Gautama, Bhaguri, Brihaspati, Kanva, Shakti, Vasishta's eldest son Jamadagni, Parasara, Markandeya, Silapaka, Arunapaala, Akritasrama, Agastya, Chyvana, Garga, Silada, Dadichi, Upamanyu, Bharadvaja, Akritavrana, Pippalada, Kaushika, Kautsa, Vyasa and others. They performed the rituals that were auspicious to our departure, carefully propitiating the pitrs and the navagraha many times. They recited hymns from the Rik, the Yajus and Saaman; they worshipped the devas in the

Nandimukha altar I had created. Then, with those brahmanas and the devas in our van and I mounted on Nandin, we set out.

Around me the gana armies swarmed, a great and weird sea flowing across the world. Shankhakarna had a thousand ganas, Kekaraksha ten thousand more and so on. A thousand such mighty gana generals marched: Vikrata, Visakha, Parijata, Sarvantaka, Vikritanana, Dundubha, Kapala, Sandaraka, Kanduka, Kundaka, Vistambha, Avesana, Mahakesa, Kunda, Parvataka, Chandratapana, Kaala, Kaalaka, Mahakaala, Agnika, Agnimukha, Adityamurdha, Ghanavaha, Sannaha, Kumuda, Amogha, Kokila, Nila, Purnabhadra and all the others.

At least a million bhutas went with the train and as many pramathas. Virabhadra was there with countless ganas and romajas. Bhairava the kshetrapala was there, with his strange and beautiful hordes. They were thousand-handed; their hair dreadlocks, their bodies pale with holy ashes, fiery with burning jewels in profusion. It was an exotic army and a glorious one; for my ganas were, in their way, as illustrious as Vishnu and Brahma's people were. Some of them were of the earth, some had come up through the patalas and others down through the seven swargas, from realms deep in the sky. They were all there, every one from every world.

Chandi was there riding on a ghost, in festive mood, but terrifying all those around her. She wore writhing snakes as ornaments; she carried a golden water pot on her head; her face was twisted and clear, her eyes drunken and dazzling. The others shrank from her when she cried out her jubilation in a ringing voice and her macabre complement of bhutas echoed her cries.

Hari and Lakshmi were resplendent on Garuda and Brahma on his Goose surrounded by the Vedas, the Shastras, the Puranas and the Agamas, personified. The prajapatis and the siddhas were with us and Indra on Airavata with Sachi: all of these among their irradiant hosts. I too, I am told, was luminous on Nandin.

Led by their master, Tumburu, the gandharvas sang and danced. The chatter of dumarus, the jhankaaras of beris and the tumult of dundubhis reverberated through the world. Ahead of us, also and at our sides, went the shakinis, yatudhanas, vetalas, brahmarakshasas, Kubera's vina vidwans, Haha and Huhu and broad streams of elven gandharvas and kinnara centaurs. The mothers of the universe and heaven's virgins went

before us when I rode to Aushadipura to marry Parvati, with a procession like a river of the sun, flowing over the earth.

When we had gone some way, Vishnu sent Narada ahead to Himachala. When Himalaya heard of our approach, he came to his gates and looked down at the tide that flowed up the mountain towards his city. Indra was worried when Narada came back and told us about Viswakarma's great hall of maaya, with the lifelike statues of the devas. The old enemy of mountains, who had sheared their wings of yore, was afraid to enter the city. Vishnu laughed at his fear, "They dare not attack us, it is no more than a loving tease."

But I was not calm either. I said impatiently, "What have I to do with statues? Does or doesn't he mean to give Uma to me?"

But then, Himavan was among us, bowing and welcoming us into his city.

THIRTY-ONE

In Aushadipura

Mena came out on to her terrace and perhaps she was not quite convinced about giving her daughter to me. She said to Narada, the insider everywhere, "Let me see the bridegroom. Let me see the face and the form for which my child spent all those years in tapasya."

I divined her thought and said to Vishnu and Brahma, "Go with the devas to the mountain's threshold. I will follow you."

They cast sharp glances at me, but went ahead. Mena was overwhelmed when she saw the glittering multitude that was my marriage procession. At its head marched the fastidious and handsome gandharvas, exotically attired, playing rapturously on their instruments. Bright flags flapped on their chariots, the delectable apsaras rode with them. Seeing Prabhasa, the lord of the vasus, who came after the gandharvas, Mena gasped and some of the wedding guests looked up to her terrace and waved. She whispered to Narada, "That is Siva."

Narada smiled, "That is not Siva, only his attendant."

Mena's eyes grew wide, "Siva is greater than him?"

She saw Manigriva, lord of the yakshas. She grasped Narada's arm and cried, "Here he is."

Narada smiled, "This is only a servant of Siva's, lady."

Agni, twice as illustrious as Manigriva, passed below. She exulted, "Siva!"

"No."

Yama went by and now Mena was certain. "Here he is surely, Maharishi."

"Only a servitor, Devi."

Nirriti, lord of the puyajanas, brighter than Yama, came along. Mena looked at Narada, but he shook his head. Varuna came and passed; Mena's eyes grew rounder and rounder. As she plumbed her ignorance. Vayu went by, then Kubera, lord of the guhyakas and then Indra himself, magnificent, mounted on Airavata. Beside herself, digging her fingers into Narada's arm, Mena cried, "This is Rudra, O Muni!"

Narada replied that it was not. Soma came, lambent and reluctant Surya; and before Mena could ask her question, the rishi shook his head. Mena was a little frightened by the time she saw Brahma. She whispered, "Siva?"

Narada said no. Then, four-armed Hari arrived, blue as a forest lotus, wearing resonant yellow silk, mounted on Garuda. In his hands were the Panchajanya and the Sudarshana, the Kaumodaki and the Saringa, the precious Srivatsa curled on his breast, next to the blood red Kaustubha. He was so awesome Mena almost swooned when she saw him and Narada answered her silent query, no, this was not Siva yet.

Narada said, "That is Vishnu. Devi, I cannot describe Siva, except to say that he is more glorious than Hari."

Mena's face shone, now she was satisfied. She said, "Uma's husband is the Lord of these lords of light? We are blessed!"

At that moment, I arrived below her terrace with my ganas, bhutas and pretas; and we had assumed shapes and forms that would not please the lady Mena at all. Some ganas were hissing, flag-waving gusts of wind; some had twisted faces, others deformed bodies. The hideous features of many were overgrown with beards more ragged than the visages they covered. Some had no faces at all; others had five and ten. Some were blind, some eyeless; some had ten and twelve eyes, staring everywhere, from all parts of their heads. Some were lame, some carried staffs and twirled nooses and others carried crude iron clubs. They came playing on horns, dumarus and gomukhas, amidst the coarsest, most abusive shouting, howling and yodelling. Narada said softly to Mena, "Here are Siva's ganas and here is the Lord himself."

She screamed just once when she saw me, then fainted: not from any surfeit of glory, but shock. She saw me five-faced, with three eyes on every face, glaring dementedly in different directions. I rode the snorting bull, was ash-coated and filthy, with an unwashed peak of jata piled on my head, the crescent moon hiding there. I was ten-handed, with a skull in one hand, the bow Pinaka in another and the Trisula in yet another. She saw me clad in tiger-skin and elephant-hide, bestial and hump-backed, grinning, crying out weirdly with the worst of the ganas: hardly the groom for her daughter!

Mena came to her senses. While her anxious sakhis gathered around her, she screamed at Narada, "Wicked Rishi, you have tricked me. Is that

deformed beast the fruit of Uma's tapasya? The Vishnubhakta was right: I am ruined. Oh, where are those perfidious Saptarishi and that treacherous Arundhati? Let me avenge myself on them. Stupid Parvati, what have you got with your penance? Our clan is doomed. Let Himavan not come near me. Oh, why didn't I abort Uma before she was born? Why didn't demons devour her in the forest? I will cut your head off myself, wretched girl."

She fainted again. What an outcry there was: the devas gathered round her and the rishis. Brahma also came. Slowly, Mena's eyes fluttered open. Narada said gently, "It is only Siva's jest, Devi. You must not be upset."

Pushing him away, she cried, "Get away from me, vile Rishi, scoundrel get away!"

The devas said, smiling, "Rudra is only teasing you."

She wailed, "Why have all of you conspired to make my child's beauty futile? Didn't you see the face of the monster who has come to marry her?"

The Saptarishi said to Mena, "Just a glance of Siva is the highest blessing. And he has come to your city as a suitor himself."

Mena howled. She hissed at them, "Get away from me, all of you. I would rather kill Uma than give her to Siva."

She lay on the ground, kicking her legs, beating her breast and screaming. Himalaya arrived there and, with no great confidence, because he knew his wife's obduracy, said, "This is not the first time he has come here in a strange form. Have you forgotten the Sunartaka?"

Suddenly, she grew deadly quiet. In a low voice, she said to her husband, "Listen to me, Himalaya. Bind Parvati and cast her into the deepest chasm, I am content. Take her to the ocean and drown her, I am content. But give her to Siva and I will kill myself."

Now Parvati, who had been silent all this while, cried, "Mother, this is Siva you speak of, who is the source of life. This is Mahadeva of infinite forms, whom you curse. If he were what you now think he is, would all these rishis and devas, Brahma and Mahavishnu, have come in his train for his wedding?"

Mena howled as if each word was an arrow in her flesh. She seized her daughter and began to flail at her. Gnashing her teeth, rolling her eyes and growling, Mena was a woman possessed. "Evil child, I will poison you

or drown you in a well. I will cut you into little pieces. You have brought shame on the whole family."

Brahma separated the mother from her daughter. He said, "You do not know Siva's true form. Give your Uma to him and see him as he really is."

Mena spat on the ground. She told Brahma, "Why don't you kill her yourself?"

Then Vishnu came and raised Mena to her feet. Just seeing him, his grace so powerful, she softened. Putting his arm around her, but his import clear, Hari said, "Mena, you belong to Brahma's family: do not abandon your virtue. You do not know Siva. He is formless and primal and everything that exists came from him. He is hideous and beautiful and beyond understanding; not Brahma or I has fathomed him. Accept him, Mena, he is the final Truth who has come to marry your daughter."

Mena, who was in awe of Vishnu, looked down at the ground. Her hysteria left her and she said in a low voice, "Only if he comes in a fair form will I give Uma to him."

Hari sent Narada to me with this message: could I assume a pleasing face and body? Such a sigh went up in the streets of Aushadipura when I did. Narada prostrated with tears in his eyes when he saw me. There was amazing grace and light in that city and, I confess, it flowed from me. I raised Narada up and went with him to my mother-in-law to be. Though she stood at splendid Vishnu's side, her mouth fell open when she saw me and a smile broke out on her teary face. In a whisper, Mena said, "Siva, great indeed must have been my Uma's tapasya that you have blessed us by coming to our city. Oh Sankara, forgive me!"

She fell at my feet. Content now, her last doubts allayed, Mena went into the antapura with her women. When I came to her door, she gladly performed the nirajana, the waving of lamps, with the other women and the rishis. I heard them whisper among themselves on that most auspicious day.

"His face has the hue of the champaka."

"Look at his smile."

"The third eye sleeps on his brow."

"The malati flowers on him shine so brightly."

"Though she loves him, Uma couldn't describe him adequately."

"His face is like a thousand moons."

"In all time, there has never been such a bridegroom."

"Parvati is blessed."

The gandharvas set up their wonderful songs and now Mena sang with them: praises of the groom! The apsaras wove their lissom bodies in and out of the music, dancing subtle, colourful truths around us. Then, the maids brought out the bride, in finery, to worship the family Deity. She transfixed us with her beauty. She stood before us, black as night and perfect: every exquisite limb shimmering with ornaments such as no bride had ever worn. She gazed unwinkingly into my face; not for a moment did she look anywhere else.

Her hair hung below her waist in a thick plait. She wore the crimson tilaka with musk and saffron. Her ears sparkled with diamonds, her neck shone with deep rubies, her arms with emeralds and pearls. Smears from head to foot with aguru, musk, sandal and saffron, her body was painted with fine lines of many colours. Her lips were painted with lac as red as the soles of her feet. In her hand was a lotus of a thousand petals, unworldly.

Golden anklets tinkling, Uma came out and stood among us. I dare not look at her directly: even when I glanced at her from the corner of my eye, every hair on my body stood on end. The blood pounded in me like a sea and I feared I would lose control of myself from just being near her. It was she again, surely, I knew her from another time. Then, my eyes were no longer mine to rule: they swivelled of their own accord and locked gazes with hers; I thought I would faint from the surge of love I felt. With a small smile, she bowed deeply to me and now she went outside the city to pray to the Goddess who was the family Deity, the Devi she was herself! Willessly, I turned to watch her go. With a laugh, Vishnu took my hand and led me away.

Himalaya showed us to our apartments. We had barely settled ourselves, when it was time for the tying of the sacred thread. Mena's tantrum had delayed proceedings and the muhurta was upon us. As is proper, the thread ceremony took place in the groom's dwelling, amidst the deep and moving chant of Vedic hymns. That day everything was auspicious, all was perfect. I gave Parvati a new set of clothes and the women in our party bathed her and anointed her with golden sandal-paste. She put on the new clothes and was lovelier than ever. Whenever I looked

at her my blood seemed to catch fire. She was irresistible in her coat of jewels.

At the thread ceremony, the bride and groom exchanged gold, ornaments and other gifts in profusion. The two marriage parties embraced each other, burying old animosities, forging new ties of friendship. Garga, master astrologer, came in and said to Himavan, "The stars are in place. It is time you brought Siva to your palace for the wedding."

I went in for my ritual bath. When that was over, they clothed me in fine silks and hoisted me onto Nandin's back. Shouting, singing and dancing in the streets, though not vulgarly now, we went to the palace of the mountain with his kinsmen who had come to escort us. I remained as calm as I could, while my mind blazed to think of her and I could barely keep from trembling.

The earth was red with vermilion, flung up in clouds by the milling crowds we walked through. They held the royal parasol above me as I walked; they fanned me with pearl-handled whisks. Vishnu, Indra and Brahma walked before me, through the sea-calls of deep conches. Nearer the palace, the apsaras and Himavan's dancing girls shimmered lattices of movement through the music and one another. When we reached the palace, Himalaya himself received us. Taking my hand graciously, he helped me off Nandin's back and bowing to us all, he waved a lamp before me in nirajana.

Himachala offered us padya and arghya. He ushered us affectionately into his palace, where he seated everyone in jewelled seats in the quadrangle of the ceremony. His great face beamed; his cup of joy brimmed over. A little round-eyed still, Mena came with her lamp for nirajana and a host of her sakhis and the wives and virgins of Aushadipura offered us holy water from the Ganga and madhuparka. The Omkara echoed unceasingly in the background, swelling as the time of the muhurta drew near. They led Parvati in and made her sit at the southern altar.

Brahma and Vishnu, at my sides, led me to her and the women began their lusty ululation. Brihaspati and the devas raised shouts of 'Jaya!' Garga sat by the ghatika, the water clock next to the altar. At the appropriate moment, he chanted the punyaha mantras and, scooping up a handful of rice grains, gave it to Parvati. As he told her to, she poured the grains over my head. She stared at me and I longed to take her in my arms right there.

Lakshmi and Saraswati came with lamps to offer nirajana and, one by one, all the devas' wives and the rishis' women. Then, everyone came to bless us in the great enclosure. Garga indicated it was time to begin. Carrying the golden vessel between them, Himavan and Mena came to us with the priest. Prompted by Garga, the mountain offered me water, clothes, ornaments that I would probably never wear, chandana and everything else proper to the occasion.

Garga announced, "The hour is here. Let the ceremony begin with the tithi being proclaimed."

In unison, all the brahmanas called out the tithi. It was time for the gotrochchara and, carried away by the moment, Himavan cried to me, "Siva, let us hear your ancestry, your name and your Veda."

There was stunned silence. At once, Narada began to strum fluidly on his vina. Himavan turned on him in some annoyance, "Please desist, Muni."

Narada played on, he sang,
*"Not Vishnu and Brahma know aught of Siva's gotra,
Then what can be said of the rest?"*

*Brahma did not find the head of the linga,
Mahavishnu did not find its root,
This is the Brahman you ask for his gotra,
Who has no beginning or end!*

*Think, O father, before you speak,
What it is you ask,
Not Vishnu or Brahma knows of Siva's gotra,
What can be said of the rest?*

AUM is Siva's only gotra, O Himalaya. He is the Naada."

I saw Himavan's face, which had clouded for a moment, clear. He bowed to me, uncanny delight shining in his eyes. It is not easy to give one's daughter away, especially if she is Uma. His voice quivering, Himavan said, "Siva, I give this Uma, my daughter, to you to be your wife. O Lord of all things, be pleased to accept her. *Tasmai Rudraaya Mahate.*"

He took her small hand and placed it in mine. The tides of her sea coursed through me and I felt her also quiver at my touch. As bravely as I

could, when my body and soul were on fire, I intoned, "*Kamasya Kodat.*"

I heard Vishnu and Brahma crying, "Jaya!"

With a shout, the gandharvas broke into song again. In soft frenzy, the apsaras streamed in and began to dance ecstatic celebration. Now, grace flooded Himavan and Mena and they began to hymn me with slokas from the Yajurveda. I sat there, silent, holding her hand and she climbed into my soul through that touch and made her home there. From some distant mandala, chanting my thousand names, her parents sprinkled water from the holy rivers, brought here in leaves of ancestral trees, over their Uma and me.

THIRTY-TWO

After the vows

It was evening, when Brahma concluded the rites. After the sprinkling of holy water, we went to the threshold and watched Dhruva, the North Star, appear just for us in the twilight sky. I put my arm around her in hridayalambana, placing my fingers over her heart, then and forever. They sat us together on a cushion and I marked her hair with vermillion. Finally, I handed the purnapaatra full of rice grains to Brahma to signify that the ceremony was complete. I made the gift of a cow to him, since he had been the priest when we walked in pradakshina around the Vedic fire. Vishnu blessed us and there were more shouts of 'Jaya! Jaya!' Gandharva music swelled around us in delirium.

The time drew near when, at last, we would be alone together. Just now, it was the time of the women. The women of Aushadipura led Uma and me to the chamber where we were to spend the night. Viswakarma had created that room in an image of Sivaloka; jewelled lamps illumined it softly. Giggling, blushing and jostling, the women undid the granthibandana, the knot with which they had tied our garments together when the ceremony began. When they withdrew, ululating suggestively, sixteen ladies of heaven came smiling into the room. They made me sit on a crystal throne, as I am not accustomed to and, as is customary, began to tease me with some ribaldry.

Saraswati said, "I hope you have not forgotten your skills at love, Siva. We used to peer down from swarga in wonder at everything you did. Look at her: she longs for us to be gone so she can wrap you in her arms!"

Laughing, Lakshmi said, "Don't sit so far from her, Sankara. Don't you see she would wrap more than merely her arms around you?"

Savitri: "Here, feed her this sweet from your mouth."

Jahnavi: "Stroke her hair, Siva, touch her."

Aditi: "Give them water and betel leaves to make their mouths fresh. I doubt they will stop with hair-stroking!"

Sachi: "Why so shy now, Sambhu? Have you forgotten how you ranged the earth like a madman when you lost her?"

Lopamudra: "Spice his betel, Uma."

Arundhati: "If not for me, Mena would not have given her to you. Now for my sake, love her till she is satisfied."

Ahalya: "Forget your age, O Eldest, this is a night for youth."

Tulasi: "You should not have burnt poor Kama. He would have helped you tonight."

Svaha: "She has a dharma towards him now, much sweeter than tapasya."

Rohini: "Above him, below him and at his side! Siva, can you satisfy all that penance?"

Vasudhara: "Knower of everything, do you know what she wants tonight?"

Satarupa: "She is hungry, Siva; feed her well."

Samjna: "Come, let us make the bed and leave them."

In rejoinder, which was expected of the groom, affecting shock I cried, "O my mothers, how can you speak like this to your son?"

They froze for an instant; then, smiling, I fed Parvati a sweet from my mouth as they had told me to. Those divine women went out laughing and slammed the door shut loudly. At once, with no hesitation or shyness, Uma put her arms around my neck: as if it was the most natural thing for her to initiate our loving. As if she was taking up where we had left off in another life, she drew me to her and gave me a silken kiss, warm enough to melt the glaciers around us. Light as she was, I picked her up and set her on my lap. We drank from each other as if we had been thirsty since the stars began. Then, she pulled away, with a hundred fluttering kisses more. Whispering in my ear so her breath played there, "I won't be long," she went into the next room.

There was a low knock on the door, locked not from within but outside. I called dreamily, "Enter."

The door opened and, her head bent, lovely, unhappy Rati stood in the doorway. She waited in silence. I said gently, "Speak, Rati, I have time to hear you."

She looked into my face without fear and said, "The worlds rejoice at your marriage, Siva, but not I. You know what it is to separated from your love; you know my pain. Lord, only when my Kama lives again will your own loving be complete. Until then, something precious will seem missing from the joys of your bed."

She walked into the room and laid an urn at my feet, with Kama's ashes in it. Tears flowing down her face, she said, "Lord, revive my Kama, only he ever meant anything to me."

I glanced at the urn and, handsome as ever, despite having been ashes for a time, Kama stood forth from death and prostrated at my feet. Rati gave a cry and fell on her husband, kissing his face, his eyes and his lips. Then she too was at my feet, bathing them in tears, crying, "Siva, Ocean of mercy, bless us for ever!"

Still dazed after having been dead, a chastened Kama stood up when I laid my hand on his head. His voice faltering, he said, "Forgive me, Siva, for what I did."

I replied, "This form of yours is not whole, Kama. Stay only in Vishnu's realm, until the end of the Dwapara yuga when Krishna is born into the world. At that time, you will be born as his son Pradyumna and you, Rati, as Mayavati. Then, all your powers will return to you and you shall range the worlds again. As for Uma and I, Rati, we are beyond needing Kama's enchantment. We were lovers before he was made."

There was rejoicing outside when Kama emerged with Rati. Changed now into fresh clothes and ornaments, Uma came back to me. As we reached for each other, Himavan and Mena knocked on the door to call us to the feast in Viswakarma's hall.

Those creations were certainly lifelike. What a sight it was: Vishnu and Brahma, the devas and maharishis at food, like any marriage guests, talking and laughing together and also, everywhere around, their lifelike replicas, gazing down silently. The cosmic artist had made even Chandi's ganas so perfectly, more than one blithe gandharva recoiled from that corner of the great hall.

Came the time for music and dance and we sat drinking together, feasting our eyes and ears until the sun appeared on the horizon, touching the vistas of ice and snow in vibrant pink and gold, in unearthly violet. Parvati never for a moment left my side and her hand remained in mine, alive with our love. At dawn, I said it was time to sleep and rose to leave that assembly where few were still awake and those that were yawned.

Vishnu and Brahma followed me out and the women of Aushadipura led us again to our bedchamber. When they shut the door, as is the custom they shouted the foulest barrage of obscenities I have ever heard, language one would hardly credit chaste women with knowing. But they sang out

their stuff with such verve, laughing coarsely as fishwives. At last, they went away, their filth fading merrily down the corridor.

Uma turned to me with a moan she had contained for a life. Blindly, my hands were upon her, our tongues entwined like mating serpents. Ignoring the bed of flowers so carefully made for us, we fell on to the floor. Tearing away each other's clothes, crying out like beasts of the jungle in rut, we did not care if all Aushadipura heard us.

For four days, she and I did not stir out of those rooms.

On the fifth day, they came to fetch us out to perform the chaturthikarma. All of us stayed on in Aushadipura. Himavan would not let us leave; though, it was his daughter he was loath to part from. Vishnu stayed with Lakshmi, Brahma with Saraswati and I with Uma. The devas remained there, all the others and Himalaya's hospitality was memorable. But the long nights were just Uma's and mine and none so pleased about this as the devas: they still had Tarakasura on their minds.

But at last, it was time we went home over glass glacier and snow-filled valley to Kailasa. One morning, because Uma could not bring herself to, I went to Himavan and Mena to tell them that we were leaving. In silence and with dignity, the mountain heard me out. Then he fell at my feet and said only, "Bless me, Siva."

I picked him up, embraced him and blessed him. Great Himachala was as loving a father-in-law as anyone could wish for. At noon, with fanfare, Brahma, Vishnu, the devas and the ganas going with us, seated together for the first time on caparisoned Nandin, Uma and I set out on the white, majestic journey to lonely Kailasa: holiest mountain.

At the gates of Aushadipura, Mena suddenly took my hand and cried, "Merciful Lord, look after my Parvati, forgive a thousand faults in her. In every birth, she is your bhaktaa; but in this one, she is also my daughter. So, pardon me for what I say, out of love for her and my ignorance of you. Conqueror of death, when she just hears your name she goes into an ecstasy; if anyone censures you, her silence is like that of the dead. Care for my child, Siva, there is no one like her."

Mena swooned before us. When she revived, she embraced both of us for the last time and went back into the city. We took our final leave of Himavan, so brave and dry-eyed today. Then we set out.

When her tears stopped, Uma reeled off for me, in a long breath, what the brahmana woman sent by her mother had told her was the dharma of a chaste wife. She repeated it all at astonishing speed, in an old woman's voice and we went on our way laughing, the devas smiling with us.

"The dharma of a good wife is told in the Vedas and Smritis. She shall eat only after her husband, sit only when he sits, sleep only when he sleeps, awaken before him, love him without deception, never show herself unembellished before him, never adorn herself if he is away, never say his name aloud. Even if he scolds her or beats her, she shall say 'Lord, you can even kill me'. When he calls her, she will leave anything she is doing and come to him. She will not go to other people's houses. She shall not take her husband's money and give it to anyone else. She will arrange everything for the daily worship. If she wants holy water, she will drink the water with which she has washed his feet. She shall not spend unreasonably. She will not fast without his consent. She will not leave him for any chore, whether he is impotent, senile, or whatever. She shall not lie with him during her periods. She shall not show herself before him after bathing. She will look at her husband's face and no other's; or thinking of him, she will look at the Sun. She will not neglect to use turmeric, vermilion, saffron, kohl, to wear a blouse, a necklace, plait her hair. If she wants him to live long she will never associate with a washerwoman, a harlot, a yogini, or a fallen woman, nor speak to any woman who disparages her husband. She shall not bathe in the nude, nor sleep on a mortar, a threshing rod, a broom, a grinding stone, or on the threshold. Except during sexual intercourse, she shall never show her maturity and initiative,' the woman said, O Siva!"

She paused just to draw a breath.

"She shall be delighted when her husband is delighted, dejected when he is, even-minded in affluence and adversity. The husband is superior to Brahma, Vishnu or Siva; to a chaste woman her husband is God, guru, dharma, Kasi and yagna. She who is unfaithful to her husband is born as a she-owl, wasting in the hollow of a tree. Disloyal women bring the ruin of three families: those of her husband, her mother and her father. By her punya, the chaste woman takes those families to heaven, wherever she goes she dispels all sins. Even the Sun, the Moon and the Wind touch the chaste woman to sanctify themselves. The chaste wife is the root of

fortune in the household. Uma, you are the mother of the universe and Siva is its father and I say this to you merely for convention's sake.'"

She spoke in one breath, ironically; but I was sure that most of what she said appealed strongly to her and she considered it all true.

Halfway along the icy, austere way, Brahma, Vishnu and the devas bowed to us, we to them, we embraced one another and they flew back to their own mandalas. The ganas and their women and Uma and I riding upon Nandin went on to Kailasa.

Karttikeya and Ganesa

THIRTY-THREE

Hiranyaretas

Nectarine waters feed the Naimisa from the foothills of the crystal mountain. The vana has abundant fruit- and flowering-trees. Here, the rishis worship Siva with a yagna so awesome it is like the penance of Viswarijas of old, who wanted to create another universe by his tapasya. They sit absorbed around the sacred fire when, suddenly, there is a mighty susurris above their heads. The flapping of a thousand wings, a vast swirling of airs: an intimation that a Deva comes among them!

The holy sages open their eyes to gaze at the sky, where the clouds part to reveal a glimmering path. Down this path, comes a God so brilliant the rishis have to turn their faces from his splendor. Smiling, that Deva dims himself to a bearable brightness and settles among them as a tempest contained. He raises his unearthly face to look at them and they bow to him, the rishis prostrate themselves. It is Vayu, the Wind, who brings them the Purana of Siva in this kalpa.

The Deva is Akasa's son, Brahma's sishya, a master of prana and his ethereal body is translucent. His voice is an airy echo of the ocean, as he says, "Munis, I bring you the Siva Purana today, where my guru Brahma's wheel of fire was broken, in this sacred Naimisa."

The rishis bow again; at his sign to them, they seat themselves in a crescent around the divine storyteller.

In his reverberant whisper, Vayu begins, "Hear from me about the love of Siva and Uma after they reached Kailasa. Hear from me secrets you might never hear otherwise. For these are secrets of the love of they who were once one body and then became two before Brahma and were united again in the world.

Narada said to his father Brahma, 'Tell me, Pitama, about the sport of Siva and Parvati when they went back to Kailasa.'

Brahma said, 'Listen then to the tale of the birth of Guha. It is sinless and will make you free. It severs the roots of karma; it is the essence of the Vedas.

After marrying Himadri's daughter Parvati, Siva came home to Kailasa with his ganas. Many of those loyal ones bid farewell to their Lord, variously and went back to the corners of the universe from which they had come. At last, Sankara and his bride entered the cavern where they had been together last when she was Sati. They were alone. The thoughtful ganas had strewn the bed of feathers with fragrant petals. In the lofty-ceilinged chamber of rock and ice, stalactite and stalagmite thrust up and down, great needles in breathtaking sculptures: abstruse music frozen. Yet, it was not cold in that cave of enchantment. The ice did not burn the skin or freeze the blood; but it fired the soul.

This was no imitation of Sivaloka in Aushadipura anymore. This was the heart of Uma's new life: the one for which she had been born. Here she felt all her years gone by were a dream, a shadow of what this mountain and this cave signified. By any reckoning of love, she was satisfied by their feverish tumults in Aushadipura, when her tide would begin as soon as he touched her and last all night, until she would see the dawn stab the sky with soft knives of light. As soon as she came into this privacy, she knew those frenzies were no intimations of what would happen here.

When they were alone together, he came to her and suddenly there was nothing human about him. Now He was only God: creator, Hiranyavarna, golden Sustainer and destroyer of time, of all the mandalas. He was terrible God, gazing at her out of three eyes with cosmic desire and a cry of fear welled in Uma. Then, he took her hand and she saw her own body transformed. She too was someone else, someone she had always been; for now she was home again. Their fingers touched, their mouths sought each other in the love that was the source of all things.

It was no more night or day, no longer Kailasa or the world. When, bared, he put himself into her body and they were one again in that cave, it was not a place among the blazing galaxies; it was home before all that. One skin, one flesh, a single darkness and light before time was, one breath, the same eternal, heaving calm they shared. She stoked him rapturously; the stars tumbled out again from his mouth and the Naara flowed from him: the eternal waters that are all times and all places, upon which, in the beginning and always, Narayana lies. They were one body; half of him was woman and Goddess, half of her was male and God. They were night and day at once, light and dark forever: the Androgyne at love with Itself.

Narada, their lovemaking lasted for a yuga of a thousand years of the heavens. Never in that rhapsodic calm did his seed flow down, but always upwards in dhyana into the infinite lotus in his great head. But the devas were impatient, Muni: only when a son was born to Siva, could they be free of Taraka's dominion. They made me their leader and we went to Vishnu.

We stood in worship before him and I said, "The love of Siva and Uma lasts an age and we have no relief from Taraka."

Vishnu said, "The time has come and the constellations around the earth have reached their destined places. The heavens tremble with the mating of Siva and Parvati, yet he does not spill his seed. How will Rudra have a son unless he emits the flaming gold of his loins? Come, let us climb Kailasa."

Faithful ganas stood guard outside the cavern with the massive stone door. They said to us, "O Vishnu, Brahma, a kalpa has passed since Siva went into the chamber of ice with Parvati and still they have not emerged. We do not know what they do inside, but stand guard here, turn by turn, so they are not disturbed. We are afraid to knock on the door."

Vishnu, who alone could take the liberty, strode past the distraught ganas. He rapped sharply on the door and cried, "Siva, what are you doing? We have come to seek refuge from Taraka."

The Blue God's voice was like thunder in those silent corridors and we were all startled to hear him. Inside the cavernous chamber, Siva snatched himself out of Uma's body while she still lay in her interminable swoon. Jumping up, shivering, Siva unlocked the door. As he saw Vishnu's smiling face, the cold draught in the passage and awful anxiety after an age of communion, unmanned Rudra. The fierce seed he should have ejaculated into Kaali's womb leapt from him and fell through the crack between door and wall: golden and smoking on the stone floor.

In a flash, Agni became a dove and swooped to swallow the burning seed. He was enchanted and otherwise that seed would consume the three worlds, for it had sprung from Maheswara's body. Parvati came naked and wailing to the door.

"Vile Devas!" she cried, when she saw what had happened. "Despoilers of love, you have made me a barren woman. Oh, may all of you live in misery forever. Siva's seed was meant for my body. Base Agni, become the devourer of all things for swallowing what was mine!"

Seizing a rueful Siva by his hand, she stormed back to their bed, slamming the door in our faces. She had not had enough: she wanted him again. He must love away her torment, because he had spent himself outside her body.

Agni choked and screamed as Rudra's hiranyaretas burned down his throat. Before our eyes, he turned pale and golden and, gasping for breath, cried piteously, "I cannot bear the burning of Rudra's seed!"

Someone said, "Find a woman and leave the seed in her womb."

Agni wailed, "There is no woman but Uma that can bear Siva's blazing seed."

Vishnu pronounced, "You must bear it, Agni, this is Parvati's curse."

For five thousand years, Agni bore Siva's terrific seed. It burned his flesh, his bones, his fat, his blood, his entrails, his seed, his skin, his hair, his beard, his eyes and his head: all golden. And he was called Hiranyagarbha, pregnant with the golden embryo.

Once, when he absolutely could not bear Siva's golden semen any more, the wives of the Saptarishi were freezing in a Himalayan winter after their ablutions in the month of Magha. To warm themselves, they came near their sacrificial fire. In a flash, Agni spewed out Siva's seed and it entered their pores with his heat. Agni vanished from there as a great flame.

Only Arundhati, who by instinct did not come too near the fire, escaped impregnation by the fulvid retas. The rest writhed on the ground, in agony and their bodies turned golden with Rudra's seed, shining through them like a sun. Their bellies became bloated and they all seemed to be in the final days of pregnancy. When they went home, their husbands, the rishis, turned them out in fury. Finally, Arundhati invoked Siva for them, while they screamed for release. By Siva's grace, they vomited his seed upon the icy Himalaya and watched in awe as it flowed together on the ground and became a tremendous golden foetus. In fright and relief, those rishis' wives fled.

Himalaya bore the lucific embryo for an hour, shuddering as if he would crumble into dust. Then with a shout like a thunderclap, he hurled the foetus into a bank of sara reeds, which grew on the banks of the Ganga. For ten thousand human years, the glade was refulgent with the divine embryo, the grass and reeds, the trees, birds, animals and men for a hundred leagues around, as if the rising sun transformed them.

In the fullness of ten thousand autumns, once, on the sixth day of the bright half of Margasirsa, a lotus-eyed boy lay in that thicket. He had his thumb in his mouth and he cried in a voice like thunder. In the heavens, a mysterious dundubhi resounded, a rain of flowers fell and a current of hope surged through the earth!

Sent by me, Brahma, Viswamitra came to that glade. He folded his hands in wonder when he saw the glorious boy. With a laugh and in perfect ancient speech, the child said to the rishi, "Flawless Muni, perform the rites of purification for me from the Veda. From now, you be my priest and bless me with your love."

Viswamitra said, "Divine child, I am not a brahmana that I may purify you with the Vedic ritual. I am Viswamitra, the kshatriya, who was once a king."

The boy said calmly, "I say you are a Brahmarishi now, Viswamitra, revered by Vasishta and the others. Keep this a secret and purify me."

Overcome, for to be a Brahmarishi was his life's ambition, Viswamitra performed the rites the boy wanted. He could not have refused that child anything: not his life, if he had asked. When Viswamitra had gone, six stellar goddesses, the Kritikas, flew down to the earth. They arrived near the thicket by the river to bathe in the holy Ganga. They saw the golden aura shining ten leagues into the air; and when they saw the splendid child, they could not contain their love.

"Let me suckle him first!" each one cried. When he saw those foster-mothers of his quarrelling over him, Karttikeya promptly grew six heads, one for each Kritika and he fed at all their breasts at once. From the moment they set eyes on him, he was dearer to them than their lives and they carried him proudly, as their son, to their home in the sky in the Pleiades. They clothed him in brilliant garments they made themselves and adorned him in scintillating ornaments. And no one knew about him, for they never let him out of their sight, never told anyone he existed. Thus, miraculous Karttikeya grew, hidden by his six mothers, deep in the sky in Vrishabha, the constellation of Taurus.'

Brahma paused, musing, until Narada urged him, 'Father, what happened next?'

Shaking his white heads in wonder at Karttikeya's childhood, the Pitama continued. 'After another yuga of making love in the mountain cave, Uma said in languor to Siva, "Lord, an age ago, when Vishnu called

you rudely out of my body and my love, you spilt your seed on the ground. Agni became a dove and pecked it up in his beak, do you remember? What happened to your hiranyaretas, Siva, which was rightfully mine?"

Tracing the contour of her black breast with a fair finger, Rudra said, "I do not know."

Uma said, "Siva, no one but I can bear your seed and yet I know it cannot fail. Perhaps we have a child somewhere we do not know about. I want to know what happened to your retas."

Siva summoned the devas and asked, "Who has hidden the seed I ejaculated? Let him speak at once and I will not punish him."

But Vishnu said, "Let he who has concealed your virtue incur the sin of a liar, of one who outrages the modesty of his guru's wife."

I, Brahma, cried, "Let anyone who has hidden your sacred retas be unable to worship you ever."

The lokapalas said, "Let him always have a pang of death in his heart."

Indra's devas, "Let him bear the sin of the stupid man who does not keep his own word."

The wives of the devas protested, "Let she who has hidden your hiranyaretas lose her mother and her family. Let her incur the sin of the debauched woman who hates her husband and fornicates with other men."

Rudra turned angrily on Dharma and the other witnesses of all things. He thundered, "Who has hidden my unfailing seed?"

We looked at one another in alarm, for he was angry. I offered hesitantly, "Your seed fell on the ground, I saw it."

Bhumidevi, the earth, said, "I could not bear the terrible semen. It burned me and I cast it into the fire."

Agni said, "Becoming a dove I drank it, for it enchanted me. I bore it for five thousand years, while all of me, even my atman, turned golden. But then I could bear it no more and I lost the seed as heat into the rishis' wives who shivered upon the mountain."

The mountain said, "I could not bear your burning seed for even an hour, O Siva and I flung it into the Ganga."

Ganga said, "Mahadeva, I too could not bear your blazing virtue. I shed it into the bank of sara grasses."

At last, Vayu, the witness, cried, "Siva, in a great thicket beside the river of heaven, your seed turned into a splendid boy!"

Now the story came tumbling out. Surya said, "It was twilight when I saw the child crying and I was sinking below the western mountain. But he lit the darkness around him even as I might, he made his own day out of night."

Soma said, "The Krittikas found the boy and took him into the sky with them."

The waters said, "They fed him at their breasts and raised him as their own, your son bright as a star."

The dusk said softly, "He is their nurseling in the vana in the sky. They call him Karttikeya."

The night said, "He is dearer to them than their lives, they never let him out of their sight. Surely, she who nourishes, owns."

The day said, "They feed him only the rarest delicacies. They clothe him in lucent finery and adorn his body with ornaments past compare."

Siva sent his ganas, Virabhadra, Visalaksha, Sankakarna, Parakrama, Nandiswara, Mahakaala, Vajradamshttra and others, fierce, great and haughty, to the home of the Krittikas.

The ganas encircled that world and Nandiswara cried to Karttikeya, "Siva sent me to fetch you. You are his son born of his seed, which the earth dropped in the fire, the fire into the rishis' wives, the rishis' wives on the mountain, the mountain in the river, which set you ashore in a thicket of sara grass. These Krittikas brought you here in love. But you, O Lord, are Siva's son, the light of the universe and they hide you here as a dry tree might try to hide a fire. Siva calls you to a sabha of the devas, you must come with us."

Karttikeya said with a smile, "They are my mothers who fed me from their bodies and raised me. Speak no ill of them. Yet what you say is true and I will go to my father's sabha."

Uma sent a silver vimana to her son, who was not quite her son. Swift as thought it was and made by Viswakarma from the light of heaven. With a heart both heavy and excited, Karttikeya climbed into the marvellous craft. Certain they would lose him, the grief-stricken Krittikas came wailing to the door of the ship. They cried pitifully to him, "How do you forsake us so ruthlessly now?"

Karttikeya replied, "You must come to the earth with me, little mothers."

Bringing the Krittikas with him, Siva's son arrived at last on Siva's Kailasa. He waited for his father at the foot of an ancient nyagrodha tree. Sankhas, bheris and turiyas rang out over white valley and jutting peak when Karttikeya came to Kailasa. All the devas, with Vishnu and I at their head and the rishis, gandharvas, siddhas, charanas and the other mountain folk with them, wound their way in a breathless throng to see Siva's splendorous son.

Uma had the road to her home paved with padmaraga and other precious stones, for Karttikeya's arrival. She stood at her city gates to welcome the boy, with Lakshmi, Saraswati and thirty Goddesses beside her. Rambha's apsaras sang and danced before him as he walked up the highway. All of us worshipped him, the boy with the golden halo. Siva wept for joy when he saw Karttikeya and when his son bowed to him, he picked him up and kissed the top of his head. Uma embraced him as if he had been born not just of her love, but from her womb as well. After the devas performed the nirajana, she spirited him off to her apartment. She suckled him at her dark breast, which had filled with milk when he was born in the thicket: that is why she had asked Siva to find him.

In the glittering sabha, Parvati set Karttikeya on her lap. She would not let him away from her, even for Siva to fondle his son. But the boy, Kumara, would not sit still. He went up to his awesome father and played fearlessly with Vasuki who hung around Rudra's neck. When they heard his childish, delighted laughter, Siva and Kaali's hearts were full. And the devas' hearts, of course, were full: for here finally was their deliverer.

Siva set Kumara on a crystal throne. From a hundred gem-encrusted pitchers of water, from the earth's sacred tirthas, the boy was given his ritual bath. Then Vishnu crowned him with a sparkling coronet he had brought and I invested him with the holy thread and the Veda, the Brahmastra and its mantra. All the devas had brought gifts for Karttikeya and when Agni embraced the boy crying "My son!" Siva declared, "As your son he shall be Mahasena and Agneya; as Uma's son, he is Skanda; as Ganga's son Kumara; Karttikeya as the Krittikas' son and Guha as mine. As the son of the sara reeds he is Sharadvata; six-faced, he is Shanmukha."

Agni gave Karttikeya a spear of fire, which he always carried then on. Indra gave an Airavata-born elephant, Yama his own staff, Varuna a royal parasol of white silk and a necklace of pearls. Surya gave him a vimana like the one in which he had flown to Kailasa and a magical coat

of mail. Soma gave him an urn full of amrita, Kama an arrow of love and his lore. Garuda gave him his son Chitrabrahma, Lakshmi a matchless necklace, Savitri gave him the entire siddhavidya.

And when he could speak, Siva said, "Kumara shall be Master of the army of the devas, the gandharvas and the kinnaras. He will kill Mahisha and Taraka for you."

Amidst ringing cries of 'Jaya! Jaya!' Vishnu invested Karttikeya with sovereignty over the universe. Then we took him down to Kurukshetra upon the river Saraswati to build him a golden shrine. There, O Muni, Siva's son was made Senapati of the legions of heaven!' said Brahma to Narada, enraptured by the tale of that birth of births."

Vayu said so to the rishis of the Naimisa in his breathy voice. While he spoke, sometimes they saw him and at others, he was only a voice, a swirling whisper in their souls.

THIRTY-FOUR

The battle by the sea

The rishis of the Naimisa wait in silence for Vayu to continue. Sighing like an autumn breeze through trees nearly bare, the Wind God slowly resumes. Wistful for those times of ancient grandeur, he says, "Narada never tires of the Purana, finding fresh wonder in it each time, finding it a different tale with every telling. And the rishi was comforted as he listened to the sacred narration. He was free from the mad itch on the soles of his feet and the burning impatience in his heart, which always cried to him, 'Move on, Narada, there is much to be done elsewhere.'

Brahma said to Narada, 'At Vishnu's command, Viswakarma created a wonderful city near Kailasa for Siva's son, Kumara, out of the thin mountain air. Hari himself installed the boy there on a golden throne encrusted with jewels big as a man's fist; and he gave Skanda the task of rescuing the universe from Tarakasura's tyranny.

An old brahmana wandered into Guha's court; he was the first supplicant there. He prostrated at Karttikeya's feet and cried, "Lord of the universe, I seek refuge in you. I began a solemn yagna, but the goat for the sacrifice broke loose and ran away. I have searched high and low, but I cannot find the animal. O Skanda, the yagna is in your name and you must help me find my goat. Twelve-eyed Shanmukha, make my sacrifice fruitful."

Kumara sent Virabahu to find the brahmana's goat. As he combed the worlds, Virabahu heard of the havoc the goat brought wherever it went. Never actually seeing the animal, the warrior arrived in Vaikunta. There, beside the holy Naara, eternal waters, he saw the beast tethered to a stake, cropping grass and snorting displeasure at its captivity.

Virabahu dragged the goat to Skanda. Karttikeya was still a boy and, from a playful impulse, he wanted to ride the animal. So, though the brahmana protested, the protector of the universe climbed down from his throne and onto the goat's back. With a bleat of alarm, the creature tore out of the mountain palace. Outside, Kumara astride, that goat traversed the universe in a wink!

When they returned from the infinite journey of an instant, Kumara said, "Brahmana, do you really want this goat?"

And the brahmana, "Lord, how will my yagna be complete otherwise?"

And Kumara, smiling, "This goat does not deserve killing, Brahmana. Go home, I say your yagna is complete."

Narada smiled at this part of the tale. For, he was the brahmana who brought the goat to Karttikeya, whose mount it has been since, when he does not ride his peacock. When Brahma paused again, ruminatively, Narada urged him on; if the tale did not move quickly, he would have to, because of his brother Daksha's curse.

Brahma said, 'The devas were euphoric at Kumara's performance astride the goat: here surely was he who could rid them of the yoke of Taraka. They challenged the Asura, now master of countless worlds among the stars, his empire of evil so far-flung it could hardly be imagined. A thunder of battle drums sounded as Taraka came in fury to the earth with his army. Dare they challenge Tarakasura, sovereign of galaxies? Had they forgotten how, once in dim time, he had given them back their puny kingdom at Brahma's plea? They were ungrateful; he would wipe them from creation!

The two armies confronted each other at the confluence of the river Mahi and the ocean. The devas trembled when they saw the conquering Asura's superbly drilled legions, a force that had never yet lost a battle. They saw lines upon lines of demons, many of whom howled in fell voices what they would do with the innards, the private parts and the women of the devas. The gods of light wondered if they had made a serious mistake.

Then, a voice spoke out of the sky to the devas, "His time to die has come. He has found no joy from all his conquests; he is weary of his life. Keep Kumara at your head and you cannot lose the day. So it is written."

Now the devas roared, each one like Vishnu and they surrounded Taraka's army. The asuras laughed at the sound because they knew their king was invincible. Still, doubt touched their hearts and they were afraid; it was yugas since they had faced so confident an enemy. They roared back at the devas, a noise that froze the blood of the gods. The demons shook the earth by stamping their feet in unison, on the wet sands of that shore of fate.

Indra lifted Kumara onto Airavata at the head of the deva army and charged the asuras. But a vimana appeared above and Kumara flew up into the sparkling craft. Roaring like a jungle of wild beasts, the first lines of the two armies clashed. In moments, that soft battlefield was strewn with trunkless heads and headless bodies, twitching in death, blood spouting on to white sand. Severed arms and legs beat brief rhythms before being still. Bodies pounded with maces were a mass of bone and gore, with flesh flattened as on a cook's board. In thousands, those soldiers fell, pierced at extraordinary angles with arrows of light and javelins of blue fire. Blood flowed in its own scarlet streams into river and ocean and cries of death and roars of triumph rent the gull-thick and quickly, wheeling vulture-thick sky. The ghosts of the dead flocked in bewildered throngs among the older dead and goblins come to take them. Beasts of carrion, vixens and dogs, were among the swooping kites and vultures, tearing at the warm flesh of the slain.

With a ringing battlecry, Taraka flew at Indra. His generals, Samhrada and Jambha, flashed at Agni and Yama and the tumult stilled the waves in awe. The sea was flat as a mirror. Varuna locked with Nairritta and Bala; Suvira, king of the guhyas, fought Vayu; Sumbha fought Sesa. Kumbha battled Soma; Kunjara, veteran of many wars fought Mihira for his life on the crimsoned beach. It is truly told, that battleground, with its wealth of dismembered corpses, was so pleasing to the brave and so horrific to the coward!

At first, the asuras had the advantage. Taraka felled Indra from Airavata's back with a sorcerous spear and the Deva king lay unconscious on the sand. Sorely pressed, the other devas snatched him up and fled the battle. Roaring louder than lions, the demons had the better of them. Then,

his ganas beside him, Virabhadra, born of Siva's rage, growling like thunder, rolling his bloody eyes, confronted Taraka. With tridents, spears, swords, scimitars, nooses, axes and spikes the two smashed and pierced each other. Suddenly, Virabhadra struck Taraka squarely in his face with an occult trisula spewing white flames. The Asura collapsed. Even from the ground he hurled a dark lance at Virabhadra and felled him. Both rose, a little dazed, now the fight in them higher than ever. They fell at each other again, roaring so awfully the earth quaked and the sea rose in hilly waves.

With astras lofty and fell and all manner of commoner weapons of light and fire, the two did titanic battle: as joyfully as if they made love! Their battlecries were climactic shouts and quickly the rest of the war came to a standstill around them. The soldiers of both armies sounded bheris, mridangas, patahas, anakas and gomukhas to celebrate the noble duel between Virabhadra and Tarakasura.

Someone called to Virabhadra, "Stop this pointless duel, O greatest Gana! It is not written that you shall kill him."

Intoxicated with the fight, Virabhadra roared back, "I will kill the Demon! I am no eunuch that my Master must come to battle. I will rid the worlds of Taraka today."

Led by Virabhadra, the ganas won that encounter, because they were masters of astras, the occult missiles. Unable to stand before the gana army and slaughtered in hordes, the asuras turned their faces and fled. When, for the first time ever, he saw his sinister legions flee a battle, with an angry howl Taraka charged the devas and Virabhadra's ganas. He had a thousand hands now; each wielded a terrible weapon. He rode on a creature from another world, leonine but no lion, six-legged, winged and pale.

When inexorable Taraka erupted on his forces, Virabhadra raised his trisula with a prayer to Siva and he shone forth, lighting up the quarters. But when he raised his weapon to finish the Asura, subtly in his heart Siva ordered him from the field. Each moment after Virabhadra went, Taraka felled a thousand deva and gana warriors. The ground was another sea of gore, the air a thickness of screams. Their morale restored, the asuras streamed back into battle, roaring "Jaya!" Victory!

Deciding the time had come to intervene, Vishnu came to fight with the bow Saringa, the mace Kaumodaki and the Sudarshana chakra, his clarion blast on the Panchajanya deafening and exhilarating.

Through the storm of flame-arrows raining death on the deva host, Hari rode out to meet Tarakasura. They fought an earthshaking duel. Vishnu struck Taraka across the chest with the Kaumodaki; the Demon pulverised the mace with a black, flashing trident. Roaring, Narayana shot a thousand arrows at Taraka from the Saringa, but monstrous Taraka turned Hari's arrows into garlands of flowers. They fell around his neck and the Demon laughed maniacally in triumph.

In a flash, the Asura flung a spear of green light at Vishnu, took the Blue God in the chest and struck him unconscious for a moment. Crying death, Hari cast the Sudarshana chakra at Taraka and the fanged Demon fell senseless on the ground. Even that final weapon did not kill him. He awoke swiftly and flung his emerald spear at Vishnu again, toppling him from Garuda's back. The battle between Vishnu and Tarakasura raged and the two armies stood by, stunned by its ferocity.

I, Brahma, said to Karttikeya high above the battleground, 'Kumara, this duel is senseless and wasteful. By my boon, Vishnu cannot kill the Asura. Only you, Sivaputra, can slay Taraka.'

I sent the brilliant boy into his first and dreadful war. With a cry of joy, that he was finally to fight as he was born to, Karttikeya leapt straight down to the earth from his vimana. Landing light as a feather, running like the wind on the ground, Agni's spear blazing, a comet in his hand as he ran, Kumara came to battle, his divine boy's cry ringing clear above all the other bedlam. Six-headed, he scythed through the enemy in a moment and came face to face with Taraka.

In some surprise, the Asura cried so both armies heard him, "Marvel, all of you, at the shamelessness of Vishnu and his older brother Indra. Look to what depths they have sunk. As if it were not enough that in every kalpa Vishnu deceived Bali, Madhu and Kaitabha, that he tricked our people as Mohini, that as Rama he killed Tataka, a woman and abandoned his sinless wife Sita, that as Parasurama he beheaded his own mother, that as Krishna he seduced the wives of anyone he cared to and married as many times as he wanted, that in his ninth avatara he preached atheism against the Vedic way; not enough that Indra, the older brother, cut mother Diti's foetus into forty-nine pieces, outraged the modesty of Gautama's Ahalya, killed Vritra, who was a brahmana's son, decapitated Brihaspati's nephew Viswarupa; as if all this were not enough, Devas, now your great leaders send a mere boy into battle against me, Taraka, lord of worlds!"

He threw back his head and roared with laughter. He said to Kumara, "Leave the field, little boy, before I grow angry and kill you."

Taraka turned his back dismissively on Karttikeya and cried to Virabhadra, "Evil Spirit, you killed countless brahmanas at Daksha's yagna. Let me visit you with the fruit of those murders."

Taraka ran towards Virabhadra with his spear, but Indra flashed at him with his thunderbolt and knocked him down. The invincible Asura was unharmed by the Vajra that could mow down an army or shear the wings of a mountain. Taraka hurled his flaming spear at Indra and the Deva fell from Airavata's back. A shiver of mortal terror rippled through the host of heaven: who could vanquish the Asura who was immune to the Sudarshana of Vishnu and the Vajra of Devendra?

Taraka pressed home his advantage. With a growl, he wrested the Vajra out of the fallen Indra's grasp and flung it at the Deva king. Great Indra screamed, he writhed in agony and again Vishnu cast the Sudarshana at the Demon and felled him. Yet again, unharmed, Taraka rose and felled both Vishnu and Virabhadra with a sweep of the macabre spear, which grew limitlessly even as he swung it. Darkness fell over the deva ranks. Still they could not conceive that, as foretold in the boon of old, only Siva's son could kill Tarakasura.

With a roar that shook earth, sea and sky, Virabhadra sprang up. He raised his trisula aloft; weapon and warrior blazed like a new black sun risen. But raising a hand, Kumara stopped the gana chieftain. He said kindly, "Why waste time, Virabhadra? Let me kill him."

Spear to spear, invoking potent sorcery with the mantras vaitalika, khecharaka and praptika, Karttikeya and Tarakasura fought. Laughing, the Demon began playfully; the spring of mirth dried on his lips when he clashed spears with Rudra's son. Their duel raged louder than the battle of the two armies, which soon stood watching as their generals thrust and hewed at each other, drawing geysers of blood. Deva and asura, gandharva, rakshasa and kinnara were rooted, breathless for the outcome. The breeze no longer stirred; the sun was pale at mid-day as if it was dusk and Himalaya came there to watch his grandson's awesome encounter. Suddenly, Taraka shouted above Kumara's boyish yells, "Who is this terrible child?"

Someone answered, "He is Siva's son Karttikeya!"

At that moment, Kumara pierced Tarakasura through his heart with the spear of spectral agni. The Demon's body blew apart with the explosive power of that thrust, in a thousand shreds. The boon of Brahma, my blessing to him, Narada, was undone and fulfilled. Taraka's blood and flesh was splattered across the beach and the soldiers of the two armies. Now the devas flew at the asuras: a vengeful tempest. Hacked from their necks, demon heads fell like monstrous hail upon that shore. Their spirits broken, their courage gone, the asuras screamed like cowards and the devas slaughtered them at will.

"Save me! Save me!" the demons shrieked, trying to flee.

Many even called to Karttikeya to save them! But the devas, who had chafed so bitterly and so long under the tyranny of Taraka and his people, were a merciless tide. After hours of unrestrained butchery, silence fell on the sandy battleground on the shores of the western sea, save for the heavy breathing of deva, gandharva and kinnara and the wash of the scarlet waves. Exhausted, the ones of light leaned on their smoking weapons, catching their breath. The asura army, vast as a jungle, had been annihilated: not a demon of the force Taraka had brought remained alive. Only then, the host of heaven raised a shout of "Jaya!", as they smeared themselves with blood from the pieces of dead Tarakasura's immense carcass.

Siva came to that field. He took Karttikeya, who was still a boy, onto his lap and stroked his head in pride and love. Uma would not let him have their son for long, but must have him herself to cosset and fondle. There was a great feast that night on the beach of victory. We were all there for the nirajana and light from the waving lamps flickered obliquely across the faces of the dead. After aeons of terror, secrecy and torment, now music, dance and songs of liberation filled the memorable night. We stayed there, singing the praises of Karttikeya, until the sun rose golden over the deep blue forest behind us. Then we bathed in the ocean and returned to our homes.'

Said Brahma."

Says mysterious Vayu to the rishis of Naimisa. They marvel as much at the storyteller of the airy face, as the Purana, which, by his power, they not only hear but actually see in lucid pictures before their eyes, as he tells it.

THIRTY-FIVE

Another son

Not pausing for breath, Vayu Deva tells the rishis in the Naimisa vana the story of Ganesa.

"Brahma told Narada of infinite curiosity the tale of Ganesa's birth. The Pitama of the worlds said,

‘The birth of Ganesa is told differently for different kalpas. In one, he was born from Siva's golden seed out of Parvati's womb, after they made love in the vana. She was so delighted with her son she told everyone to come and look at his perfect face. She did not except Shani Kruradrishti and Saturn's evil eye burnt up Ganesa's head. Before it was too late, Siva attached the first available head onto his son's body and this was of a one-tusked white elephant.

In another kalpa, deep in a jungle, Siva and Parvati saw two elephants mating. Excited by that spectacle, they too assumed elephants' bodies, one black and one white and went to rut. The son born out of their ecstatic mating was Ganapathy, with a white elephant's head.

But listen, my son, to the story of Ganesa's birth in the Svetavaraha, kalpa of the White Boar. Once, many years after Siva and Uma were married and some years after the birth of Kumara, Parvati's sakhis Jaya and Vijaya said to her, "They who stand guard at our doors are loyal to Siva. You should have a gana of your own, Kaali, faithful just to you."

Uma only smiled. Then one day, when she was bathing in her apartment with her sakhis, she had Nandin on guard outside with instructions to let no one in. Siva came unexpectedly to her door. Nandin meekly suggested to his Lord that perhaps he should wait outside until Uma finished her bath; Siva gave him a look that made him tremble and stormed past him into her chambers. Uma's sakhis shot out of the steaming bath water, shrieking, trying to cover their nakedness. Siva muttered an apology and went out, smiling to himself. Uma was furious. The same day, she decided, though she breathed no word of it to him, that she would have her own gana to guard her door and he would let no one in without her consent.

When she returned to her bath, she saw the dirt she had washed from her body floating on the water like thin clay. She scooped up the handful of grime, tangled with her hair and breathed life into it. In a flash, a brilliant young man stood before her, his palms joined in reverence and beaming in love. He was towering and flawless of limb. Pleased no end, she clothed the youth in rich silks, she adorned his beautiful body with ornaments; blessing him, Uma cried happily, "You are my son! I have no one else I can call just my own."

Her powerful child said, "What task have you for me, mother?"

Caressing his cheek, Uma said, "You shall be my dwarapalaka. And remember, no one will come in here without my permission."

Uma gave him a staff of flames with which to guard her door. Looking at him, so strong and handsome, she hugged and kissed him again and went back to her friends and her bath. In a short while, Siva arrived at Parvati's door and tried to enter. Her son barred his way. "Where do you think you are going? My mother is bathing inside, you cannot enter without her permission."

Siva stared at him for a moment. Still calmly, he said, "Who do you think I am, that you bar my way? I am Siva."

He began to go in, but the youth fetched him a warm blast with his fire staff and stopped him in his tracks. Siva took a deep breath and said through his teeth, "Foolish boy, why do you stop me from entering my own house? Don't you know Uma is my wife?"

The youth replied with another restrained stab of his staff. Siva shouted to his ganas and when they came running, he thundered, "Who is this? How did he come here? Don't just stand there gaping, ask him!"

The ganas muscled up to the boy, who stood his ground, not batting an eye. "Who are you? Where have you come from? If you value your life, you had better leave this place quickly!" said the Sivaganas.

They jostled him a little, tried to shove him back and were amazed when they could not budge him. Grinning, he said, "Who are you handsome fellows, with faces like the backsides of beasts? I think it is you that should vanish from my mother's door."

The ganas laughed loudly, more to reassure themselves than from real mirth. They cried, "We are Lord Siva's ganas. If you are a gana too, we shall not kill you but just remove you from here. But if you are a wise fellow, leave yourself, don't force us to hurt you."

The young dwarapalaka replied softly, "Go."

The mighty ganas were strangely perturbed and could not tell why. Saying how the impudent wretch would not dare challenge the ganas of Siva like this if they themselves were not so polite, they went back to their Master who stood at a slight remove. The ganas reported what the young man said.

Siva rasped at them, "Have you lost your manhood, O my Ganas, that you let him mock you? Or is it just your usual taste for a fight □ to flee at once! If you attack him with no more than taunts, of course he will say anything that comes to his mind. Go give him a taste of your blows and see if he changes his tune."

Nandin, chief of the ganas, murmured, "He says he is Parvati's son."

Siva turned on him angrily, "And I must bow to the whim of an arrogant obstinate woman who is my own wife? Thrash the boy. Kill him if you have to, or they will say Siva is henpecked. Go!"

Reluctantly, Narada, the ganas went back to the youngster, who stood staring straight ahead of him, a smile still curving his fine lips. Nandin said in his most menacing tone, "Leave this place, child, if you don't want to die."

Without bothering to look at him, the youth replied, "Look for your strength to your master and I to my mother. Let us see who wins."

The Goddess at her languorous bath heard voices raised outside and said to her sakhi Jaya, "Go and see what is happening."

Jaya opened the front door a crack and peered out. She went running back to her mistress and cried in glee, "Siva's ganas are threatening ours, but he faces them calmly. He will not let Siva enter. How handsome he is, how bold! You must not back down now: Siva must not come in unless they defeat our dwarapalaka. He takes you too much for granted."

Uma knit her brows. She muttered, "Can't Siva wait before breaking in? You are right, let him not come in without a fight."

Uma sent Jaya back to the door with a message, "'They cannot defeat you, my son; what are these ganas before you? Don't let them in!' says your mother to you."

While the women went back, giggling, to the pleasures of their bath, the youth, slapping his thighs, cried merrily to the Sivaganas, "Not humbly or forcibly will you enter my mother's apartment. I have never fought a battle before, but my mother shall see my valour. I fight for her!"

Nandin charged the boy and caught him by a leg. He smashed the gana's hand with his burning staff and Nandin had to let go, bellowing in pain. Then, like a summer storm, he was at the gana force with his mother's danda. Mighty, war-hardened heads, hands, backs, necks, legs and chests he burned; he smashed them like eggshells, laughing all the while in his clear, fresh voice. They fled before his onslaught and ran to Siva. Bristling with fight, the young warrior stood again at his mother's door, like Yama at the end of a kalpa!

Hearing the commotion of that encounter, which sounded as if the worlds were ending, Vishnu and I flew there to investigate. The devas, the asuras and the other immortals had already arrived and Siva said to us, "The boy churns my army of ganas, my experts in war, like the mountain did the ocean. He catches their weapons in his teeth and smashes them back with his staff. Earth and sea tremble and the sky whirls, with the stars dislodged from their places."

Never had such a battle been fought outside a bathing-room. Vishnu went to test the strength of the boy blessed by Parvati and was knocked to the ground with a flaming blow. Vishnu said to Siva, "I have seen many devas, daityas, danavas, rakshasas, yakshas and gandharvas, but none to equal this guardian. You will not kill him without deceit."

"We shall see!" cried Siva angrily. Brandishing his trisula and pinaka, Rudra went into the fray where, with nerveless ease, Uma's youth was demolishing all the devas and ganas that besieged him. Siva challenged him with a shout. In a blink, the wizardly staff struck the weapons out of Rudra's hands. That uncanny danda always stayed in the boy's whirling palms, but left them also, both at once, to smash back any attack. It was swifter than a thought, ablaze.

Vishnu whispered to Siva, "Work your way around him and when he attacks me, kill him from behind."

Siva crept behind the inexhaustible guardian, while Hari challenged him from the front. The youth hurled an iron-studded club at Vishnu when he saw him coming and Narayana struck it in shards with the Sudarshana chakra. The boy snatched up one sliver and cast it at the Blue God, but Garuda caught the deadly piece in his beak. The young man fell on Vishnu with his mother's danda. With a lightning, elongated blow of flames, he struck Hari off Garuda's back. Mahavishnu sprang to his feet with a roar and leapt at him. As they wrestled fiercely, Siva crept up from behind and

took off that youth's head with his trisula, so he died in Vishnu's arms. Even after he was dead, for some moments, his headless body continued to wrestle Vasudeva, in obedience to his mother's will.

The ganas set up a great cheer when Siva beheaded the dwarapalaka; they beat out rhythms of victory on mridanga and pataha. With a terrible wail, Uma came flying out of her apartment, stark naked, beating her breast and howling, "What shall I do? Where will I go? Misery engulfs me, the devas and the ganas have murdered my son."

Suddenly, she was Bhadrakaali before us. Her eyes rolled awfully, she pulled her hair and screamed, "I will drown you in a deluge of blood!"

In an instant, a hundred thousand horrible Shaktis, fanged, four-armed, mounted on lions and wielding dreadful weapons, stood where the youth had been killed. They stood bowing to Uma.

"Mother, command us."

In awesome fury, Mahamaya commanded them, "Devour all these. Devour the devas, ganas, rishis, yakshas and rakshasas. Devour my husband. I will make an end of everything today, for they have murdered my son."

Her terrifying karalis, hunchbacked kubjakas, lame kanjas, long-headed lambasirsas set about their task like fire in dry grass. They picked up deva and asura, rakshasa and Sivagana and flung them into yawning maws like bits of candy. Even Siva trembled at the advent of Uma's primordial shaktis.

When a million were dead, in no time, Uma still stood unappeased among her furies; trembling in fright, the rishis ran to the mountain's daughter. They fell at her feet and cried, "Mercy, Mother of the universe! Adi Shakti, the worlds quail at your anger. Be calm, Devi, let there be peace."

Deranged, naked Uma glared at them insanely. Her pupils were dilated wide as her irises and her eyes rolled crimson in their black sockets. She spoke no word, only glared, her lip curled, her hands clenching and unclenching. Again, they prostrated abjectly, "Durga, forgive us! See where Siva himself stands, hands joined in contrition, shaken. What then of Brahma, Vishnu or the devas? We are only your creatures, Ambika: remove our terror, give us back peace."

Uma's body shuddered ever so slightly, as if a current of sanity flowed again in her soul. She sighed and her eyes rolled no more. Parvati,

the mother, said softly, "If my son has life again, I will stop the killing and recall my shaktis. Otherwise, havoc continues!"

The maharishis came to where Siva stood with Vishnu and me and conveyed what she had said. Siva cried, "Let it be as she wants, so there is peace." He commanded his ganas, "Go north and bring back the head of the first living creature you meet. Don't dither!"

The ganas washed the youth's headless trunk and carried it north. The first living creature they encountered was a magical being: a white elephant with only one tusk. With its consent and a prayer, they cut off that elephant's head and joined it to the dead boy's neck. Siva sprinkled holy water on the great body and the devas cried, "Siva, let your tejas enter him through the Veda!"

The youth awoke among the living, ruddy and brilliant again and elephant-headed. When Uma saw her son alive, she gave a cry of joy and clasped him to her, kissing his extraordinary head and sobbing. She blessed him with all the siddhis and touched his lofty brow with her precious hand, which removes every distress.

"Oh, my son, strife has been your lot since the moment you were born. Now you shall be peaceful and contented. You will have worship before all the devas and for the blood on your face men shall worship you with vermilion."

Siva came there, glowing with relief. He placed a tender hand on the youth's head and said, "This is another son of mine. He shall be the lord of all my ganas, we will call him Ganesa."

Uma's eyes brimmed over, though she did not look into her Lord's face and spoke no word to him yet. Rising from his mother's lap, Ganesa bowed to Brahma, Vishnu and Sankara. He said, "Arrogance is man's nature, let my crimes be forgiven."

With a joyful laugh, embracing Ganesa, Siva cried, "He shall be worshipped before us all. If he is not worshipped, we are not worshipped either and the fruit of the ritual lost. He will be worshipped with durva grass, a fast, sandal paste, rice grains and ketaka flowers by those that want unequalled happiness in the world, especially women and kings."

All the smiling devas cried, "So be it."

Narada, when Ganapathy was made a Deity, peace was restored to the worlds. Parvati called off her shaktis and misery grew dim throughout

the sacred universe. Siva and Uma were united again and there was jubilation on Kailasa.

Whoever hears this tale with a pure heart shall become an abode of everything auspicious. The barren are made fertile, the indigent become wealthy, the sick find health and the miserable good fortune by the grace of the faultless Ganesa, Lord of the ganas!' Said Brahma the grandsire to the restless and enraptured seer, his son, Narada."

Says pervasive Vayu, in compassion, sighing happily in his mystic airs, to the rishis of the Naimisa vana, who are thirsty for the ambrosial Purana.

THIRTY-SIX

Mallikarjuna

"Divine Vayu, do not stop until you have told us the whole Purana," say the rishis of the Naimisa, chief among whom in that kalpa was Saunaka, the austere.

His face a bright and mobile vapour, Vayu says,

"Brahma, my guru, said to his itinerant son Narada, 'Muni, when they had two wonderful sons, the joy of Siva and Parvati was boundless.'

Narada sat curled like a child at Brahma's feet, savouring the Purana. Brahma had first told it to Narada's brother, Sanatkumara, who then revealed it to Vyasa, who gave it to the world in a bygone kalpa.

'Great was the love they shared in that family: Mahadeva, Kaali and their two sons, one six-faced and the other elephant-headed. One day, Uma said to Siva, "They are old enough now to marry. We must find brides for them."

The boys were delighted when they heard. They challenged each other, the elephant-headed and the six-faced, each crying, "I will marry before you!"

Even among them, there existed the rivalry that darkens love between brothers. Siva said, "You might not believe it, but you are both equal in our eyes. So we have decided the one who goes around the earth and comes back here before the other, shall marry first."

Bowing quickly to his parents, Karttikeya shot away from Kailasa like an arrow. Ganesa stood where he was, sighing to himself, snuffling through his trunk, while thought furrowed his great brow and glinted in his canny eyes. Finally, with a deepest sigh, he also bowed and left his parents' presence. Ganesa did not set off on a journey around the world. He only went to the river and bathed, muttering under his breath, "I cannot go round the earth, at best I may go a krosa!" His bulk was great. "Anyway, of what use is the happiness one gets after going round the world?"

When he finished bathing, Ganapathy came home and prepared two seats of kusa grass for Siva and Uma. When he had them seated, side by side, he folded his hands and circled them seven times in pradakshina.

Then he prostrated and said, "Mother, Father, let me be married quickly now, I have done what you asked."

Parvati laughed, "You were to go round the world. Kumara has already set out; you must hurry if you hope to catch up. Come back before him and we shall surely get you married first."

Ganesa said, "I have gone round the world more than once since you told me to."

Uma said, "Sweet child, when did you go round the earth of seven continents and oceans, the world of towering mountains, of holy rivers and deep jungles?"

As a smile touched his father's face, Ganapathy said blandly, "The Vedas and the Shastras say, O my Mother, he who walks around his parents goes round the earth. While he that leaves them and goes on a pilgrimage incurs the sin of their murder. A son's holiest shrine is the feet of his parents. I have walked around you not once, but seven times, with perfect faith in my heart. Either you get me married, or declare the Vedas false, since they enjoin what I have done."

He stood before them, palms still folded and Siva burst out laughing and embraced his intelligent son. Siva cried, "You are a sublime soul! When misfortune comes, only intelligence has the power to dispel its darkness. Ganesa, you shall be married at once and Kumara when he returns."

At a shining ceremony organised by Viswakarma and attended by us all, Hari and I, the devas and the others, Uma and Sarva got Ganesa married to Prajapati Viswarupa's daughters, the exquisite twins Siddhi and Buddhi. Soon, Ganapathy had a son from each wife. Kshema was born to Siddhi and Laabha to Buddhi, both splendid boys.

While Ganapathy enjoyed domestic bliss, Karttikeya was on his way home, triumphant after an exhausting journey and certain his brother had not overtaken him. You, Narada, met him. You told Kumara all, as you need not have. You seemed to be in such anguish, as if the injury was first to you and only then to him.

You whispered, "I speak the truth, though I can hardly believe it. How can one's parents treat one so callously, even if one's mother is not one's own flesh and blood? How can one's father stand for it?"

You paused, clicking your tongue in sympathy. Impatient after his great journey, Guha said, "What are you babbling, Narada? Tell me what

you have to say."

You, my son, hesitated, as if unsure if you should or not. He seized you roughly. He could not wait to be married first; surely Ganapathy was not even halfway round the world yet and panting along. Kumara shook you by your slender shoulders. He cried, "Tell me, Narada, quickly!"

Sighing, you said, "It is the truth, Guha. No one else would be so heartless as Siva and Uma."

"Tell Narada!" roared Kumara.

"After they had sent you around the world, they wasted not a day and Ganesa was married to both Viswarupa Prajapati's beautiful daughters. He lives happily with his parents, his wives and two handsome sons, while you are still on your way home! What I say is there were two girls, each as lovely as her sister; why couldn't one have been given to you? After all, are you not the elder one? Your parents have not done right by you, Kumara. If one's own parents cheat one, who else will have a care? You should not look at the faces of a mother and father who have treated you so wretchedly."

From the corner of your eye, you watched his six faces turn crimson. You heard the stricken cry torn from him. Then, his eyes streaming, he flew into his parents' home. They sat with Ganesa and his wives and their grandchildren playing near them. With a cry of joy, Uma sprang up and ran to Karttikeya. He pushed her aside and stood glaring at Siva for a long moment. He bowed stiffly to his father and without a word, turned and stalked out of that palace forever.

Karttikeya went to the Krauncha peak, where the Manasarovara is, with Uma's cry ringing in his ears, "What have we done, where are you going?" Even today, Narada, just as you intended, he lives there: an unfettered Guardian with all the time in the world for his bhaktas. His vision removes every sin; his name bestows auspiciousness upon the earth. In the month of Karttika, the devas and the maharishis come to the place where he dwells. Whoever sees Siva's son Karttikeya during the day of the Kritika nakshatra of the Kritika maasa is stripped of all his sins, even of the desire to sin anymore.

Parvati slumped unconscious to the floor when Kumara walked out of her home. When she came to herself, she was inconsolable with guilt. If Ganesa had been in Karttikeya's place, might she have done differently? She shut herself in her room, weeping and mourning her son as if he had

died. When the moon grew full and her grief with it, she came out, her hair wild and loose, tears still streaming down her dark face and cried to Rudra, "We must go to him at once. We have wounded his very soul."

Though he doubted the wisdom of this course, to appease his wife Siva went out to the Krauncha with her. When Kumara heard they were coming, he left that peak and went three yojanas away. He did not want to see them, he was so certain that they had betrayed him.

There on the Krauncha, in sombre sorrow, Siva remained as the mystic Jyotirlinga Mallikarjuna, gleaming amidst the ice and the snow. Ever since, the Lord goes there secretly on each day of the new moon, amavasya, to gaze at his son yearningly, from afar. Uma goes on the night of the full moon, purnima, to see him better and to cry for him in her endless guilt and grief.

Narada, the tale of Karttikeya and Ganesa frees a man from his sins and gives him everything he desires. It frees the sick from their affliction, the terrified from their fear, the possessed from ghosts and goblins. This story is perfectly pure and bestows sons and grandsons, long life and heaven. It can confer even moksha, for in truth it is Siva himself.'

Said Brahma softly to his son Narada, adrift now, his eyes shut, on the currents of the immortal Purana."

Vayu, who has the role of Suta in that kalpa, tells the rishis in the Naimisa vana.

Yuddha Khanda:the cantos of war

THIRTY-SEVEN

Tripura

In another kalpa, Saunaka's rishis sit enraptured before the great Vedavyasa's sishya, Suta Romaharshana and hear from his lips the amrita Purana of Siva. Suta says,

"Vyasa, my guru, said, 'When Narada asked Brahma to tell him about the burning of the Tripura, the Pitama said with a smile,

'Once, when Vedavyasa wanted to hear the Siva Purana, my son Sanatkumara told him about the Tripura and how Mahadeva destroyed them with fire. Sanatkumara said, "When Siva's son Karttikeya slew Tarakasura, the asuras found they had no sanctuary anywhere. The avenging devas hunted them on earth, in the heavens, down in the under-worlds and slaughtered them. Few escaped the holocaust: after their long enslavement by the demons, Indra's people were determined to have savage satisfaction of them.

But Taraka's three sons, Tarakaksha, Vidyunmalin and Kamalaksha, escaped the lords of light. They vowed they would undertake a tapasya no less than their father's, of old: to gain a safe haven for their people scattered by the avenging devas. The asuras were forced to go in disguise, despicably and to hide even from their own; they were a mighty race reduced to shame. They covered their faces and scrabbled amidst deserts and in mountain caves, where man and deva did not come.

Taraka's noble sons climbed to a secret cave on Mount Meru and performed a tapasya that at least equalled the single penance of their sire. Relinquishing every pleasure, they were like three flames of worship. In summer, they sat in dhyana at the heart of five fires; four they built around themselves and the fifth was the sun above. Frequently, one or the other would faint from the heat. In the dead of winter, they sat in freezing streams laden with ice floes, while their bodies turned blue. During the monsoon, they bared themselves to lashing rain, soaked to the bone, while the skin stretched like faded parchment across their skeletons.

They ate only roots and herbs, when they ate at all. They stood on their hands and heads for years, still as stones. Their penance grew harsher

as the capacity to mortify their flesh increased. Sleepless they meditated, whilst nightmares ravaged them. Their bodies were skin and bone. The tree-bark they wore was caked in mud, encrusted with dry duckweed and slime and the world itself had grown dim because the tapasya of Taraka's sons drained its light. One day, when only he had count of how long the penance of Tarakaksha and his brothers had lasted, Brahma, their ancestor, stood in glory before them and said, "I am pleased with you, enemies of the devas. Ask me for any boon."

They fell at his feet and, his voice strident from disuse, Tarakaksha said, "Lord of creation, if you are truly pleased, grant us invincibility from every being in your universe. Let not old age, sickness or death befall us; for of what use, O Pitama, is wealth, vast earth, lordship over great cities, or any glory whatever, if one is to be swallowed by death in five brief days?"

Brahma stared at the ambitious Asura. Slowly, he said, "It is not in my power to grant immortality. All creatures that are born must die and be born again; only Siva, conqueror of time and Mahavishnu are free from death. I myself am mortal. Ask me for anything else, Danavas. Choose a boon befitting your stature; you would not know what to do with immortality."

They consulted together in whispers, then Tarakaksha said, "When Taraka was killed our people became homeless and the devas them as vetalas do animals of the vana. Grant us each a fortress of a city, invulnerable to the gods of light and their weapons, impregnable against all creatures of land and sea and sorcery as well. Let our race live there in safety for ever."

Brahma objected, "I cannot give you cities that is perfectly safe."

Tarakaksha said, "Then let it be destroyed only by a single arrow of Siva's. We have no enmity with Rudra. He is the greatest God and we are his bhaktas."

Brahma blessed the demons of the matchless penance. "So be it. But remember, if your people torment the rest of creation, your cities may as well be made of straw, for so shall they burn."

Brahma directed Viswakarm to build that sanctuary for the daityas and he vanished as wealth won in a dream. The cities Viswakarm built, under instructions from Tarakaksha, the eldest brother, also called Mayaa, were like no other the worlds had ever seen. Kamalaksha had his city of

silver on bhumi and it was great and intricate. Vidyunmalin had his city of bronze in patala and it was marvellous. Tarakaksha himself had his city of gold and dreams built for him in swarga and it was peerless.

The three cities lay in each other's shadows. Once every thousand years, at midday during the hour of abhijit, when the moon was in the Pushya nakshatra and when Pushkara and Avarta showered invisible rains down on the earth, the three cities became a single one. Only on that day were they vulnerable to Siva's unlikely arrow. Besides, the sons of Taraka, especially the eldest, were the most faithful Sivabhaktas.

Ah, such cities were the Tripura of those demons! Lofty arches led into them along royal highways. Like everything else here, the mansions, ramparts and sky-scraping turrets, these arches were made of gold, starry metals and stone. They were studded with incredible jewels. Above, elegant sky chariots flitted, encrusted with padmaraga, glinting in the sun and the moon. Kalpa vrikshas, trees of wishes, lined the wonderful streets. Palaces towered over groves of asoka trees, koyals warbling in their branches. There were gardens with clear pools full of lotuses and some palaces were twenty stories tall. The Tripura, made with the rarest materials from the three worlds, basked in a veil of fragrant incense and sacrificial smoke from the quarter of worship: Siva's sanctum!

Each of them awesome as Yama, the daityas came home to Tripura. Like a pride of lions returning from captivity into a jungle, or sea-monsters into the ocean, they swarmed majestically into the triune sanctuary and began living in lordly mansions their kings bestowed on them. Invincible to the enemies of the asura brothers, the Tripura teemed with a billion daityas! They rose like clouds from sutala and patala and from mountain crannies where they had laid up like insects under stones. As each family arrived, it asked a boon of Tarakaksha and he granted it, whatever it was; great was his power within the precincts of his cities.

On silvery evenings of the moon, around the lotus pools in the parks and gardens, through orchards of mango and past tapovanas of rishis at dhyana, the demons strolled in freedom again. After the harsh centuries of exile and impoverishment, they wore fine silks. Their battle-scarred bodies were anointed with sandal-paste and scented oils and their women and children were at their sides.

Great was the prosperity of the Tripura. The asuras of the three cities were noble and devout, their women were chaste and, after the bitter years,

they cherished what they now had. They followed the teachings of the Vedas and the Smartas and worshipped Siva day and night with virtue and contentment. Wives were chaste, sons were loyal and Vedic hymns blended in harmony with the tinkling of dancers' anklets, the plucking of vinas and the sweet breath of flutes. Dallying in the Tripura, the danavas heard their women's soft laughter and their hearts were full.

A long time passed in plenitude, dharma and Sivabhakti. But time is a wheel that turns surely. Slowly, not even perceptibly at first, the evils of life, which had been so conspicuous by their absence in Tripura, crept in stealth into the minds and then into the lives of the noble demons. Misfortune, envy, thirst, hunger and discord came to Tripura. At twilight these came, unbidden, unnoticed, the fruit of too many years of peace and fortune; they came like the viruses of some fatal disease invading the body. Mayaa saw them clearly, in a nightmare, even before the ruin set in.

Evil did not easily gain a foothold, for the asuras had a potent secret. Whatever sins they committed, as time passed, they worshipped Siva as a crystal linga enshrined in the quarter of worship; and their intransigence were forgiven them, their sins ashed at once. For, in time, Tarakaksha Mayaa had grown to be the greatest Sivabhakta in the worlds. In those middle days of the unrivalled prosperity of the Tripura, Indra and his people were miserable, their envy of the demons tore at them with green talons.

They went to Brahma, who had granted those daityas the boon. Indra said grimly, "We are dismayed at the growing power of the danavas of Tripura. They are asuras, Pitama and never to be trusted. You have blessed them too generously."

Smiling to himself, Brahma said, "If they abandon dharma, Siva will burn them. So far, they are virtuous."

He paused and gazed into his mystic heart, at the tides of the future he saw gathering there. He murmured, "It might be wise to meet Siva after all, just in case..."

The devas flew to Kailasa and, palms of light joined, Indra said to the bull-bannered One, "Obeisance, golden-wombed Lord, creator, sustainer and annihilator of everything. Obeisance, Lord of tantra, Lord of Uma, O Brahman, O Mahakaala! Siva, Taraka's sons have vanquished Indra's armies. The asuras of Tripura have Brahma's boon and they are

invincible within their cities. They will overrun the three worlds, Rudra, only you can stop them."

Siva said gravely, "The sons of Taraka worship me and they are righteous, O Indra. How can I kill my bhaktas?"

He waited for their reply and they stood silent and disconsolate before him. With a sigh, Rudra said, "Of course, there is no harm in taking your fears to Vishnu."

The devas flew back to Brahma. With him, they went to Vaikunta where immortal Narayana lay upon Anantasesha. They cried to the Blue God, "Hari, how will we ever have peace again, when the demons of Tripura will subdue the universe?"

Vishnu said, "As darkness does not appear before the sun, no evil comes to a city where dharma rules. Tarakaksha's people are devout, they worship Siva unfailingly."

Indra wailed, "We devas will perish!"

Hari said, for they were his favoured people, "You, too, must worship Mahadeva."

The devas undertook a great yagna. From the pit of sacrifice, rose a thousand awful bhutasanghas, each with a thousand bhutas, armed with fiery trisulas, every spirit a mass of flames. Vishnu, Lord of yagnas, cried to them, "Fly to the Tripura, O Bhutas, make them ashes!"

Howling horribly, the spirit hosts flew to the demon cities. No sooner did they enter their portals than unseen fire made their blazing legions ashes and they fell softly on the Tripura, like Rudra's blessings.

Shaking his beautiful head, Vishnu said, "All the demons' sins are washed by their worship of Siva's immaculate linga. Their cities cannot be taken by force."

Then, he mused, "But what if we destroy their faith, so they do not worship Siva any more? What if we use guile and dharma disappears from the Tripura? How long will they stand if they do not adore the linga any longer?"

Vishnu waved away the mournful devas. "Leave it to me, I will corrupt them myself."

Out of his own essential being, Vishnu created a prophet of delusion, a false guru. He was Mayaamoha of the shaven head, clad in dishevelled clothes, with a wicker basket in his hand and a roll of spun cotton that he

shook, rattling it with every step he walked. His thin hands trembled with weakness, but he held in them a Maayashastra in apabhramsa: a subtle doctrine thousands of slokas long, a veritable tome of his invention. That unholy book preached non-violence, forbade srauta and smarta rituals and created a separate order for women so they abandoned their homes and became 'liberated' yoginis. Clutching his book of cunning lies in his hand, Mayaamoha stood, frail and glowing, before Vishnu and cried in his shrill voice, "Dharma! Dharma!"

Hari laughed aloud at the peculiar sight. He said to Mayaamoha, "Your mission is not with me. Go to the Tripura and preach your doctrine there. Subvert the hearts of Mayaa's asuras. My own maaya goes with you, so fear nothing."

Mayaamoha, called Arihat by the Lord, mesmerically chanted the pivotal tenet of his philosophy: "Heaven and hell are both in this world. There is no before or after."

Shuddering a little at this, Vishnu said, "Go forth and preach your wretchedness; you have my blessing, you will incur no sin. After you have ruined the Tripura, my clever one, you shall go into the desert and stay there until the dawning of the kali yuga, the age after your own heart. In the kali, Arihat, your dharma will manifest in all its forms; for it belongs in the kali, when true dharma scarcely survives. The dark age will call you a prophet; and finally, at yuganta, I will give you moksha as well. Go, strange fellow, hasten to your task."

On his way, from his thought, Arihat created four disciples for himself, bald-headed masters of his heresy. They too covered their mouths with pieces of gauze, each held a broom made of cloth and a wicker basket and they went with their master, chanting in reedy voices, "Dharma! Dharma!"

They walked slowly, because they would not harm any living thing, not an ant or an insect on the ground; they would not even breathe the microbes of the air. Their master and maker called them Rishi, Yati, Acharya and Upadhyaya and each one Arihat as well. Outside Tripura, where they soon arrived by wizardry, they settled in a garden beyond the lofty gates and preached their bizarre fundamentalism. At first, because Siva's grace pervaded those cities, their maaya was ineffectual and no one came to hear their sermons. If any demon did, from curiosity, he laughed to hear such elaborate rubbish.

Arihat was distressed. Paranoia curled itself round his spirit and, for all his professed atheism, he prayed fervently to Vishnu to come to his rescue. Vishnu sent Narada to him. The itinerant rishi took the semanticist's hand, led him into Tarakaksha's city and court and presented him to that virtuous and magnificent Asura.

Smoothly, Narada said, "Son of Taraka, how is it such a great sage sits at your gates and you do not invite him to preach in your city? If you comb deepest patala, you will not find a prophet like him. On my wanderings, I have encountered many cults and philosophies, but never one to match this master's wisdom. I myself have become his sishya and, if you value true dharma, you will also."

Tarakaksha cried, "If immortal Narada is a sishya of this muni, who are we not to accept him as our guru? Look at his shining face; truly, we could learn wisdom from him. Initiate me, holy one."

Arihat demurred, "Only if you have complete faith in me and do exactly as I say, will I disclose this doctrine of doctrines, this final fruit of all philosophy."

Tarakaksha swore, "I will obey your every wish, never will I transgress your will. On my honour and my life, I swear this."

Arihat removed the square of white gauze from his mouth. His eyes shone with the prospect of having success and power. His voice like metal scraping on metal, he rasped, "Lord of the asuras, I will initiate you into the best of doctrines. Be my disciple from now and be contented."

The false guru subjected the king of the asuras to a long and absurd ritual of initiation, as prescribed in insane detail in his Maayashastra. Overcome by the hypnotic sorcery of those mantras, the great Demon left discernment behind him. Thus began the fall of Tripura; thus Vishnu first infiltrated those protected cities. When Mayaa, lord of Tripura, had been initiated into Arihat's heretic doctrine, could his people be far behind? Soon, long lines of devout demons waited outside Arihat's mansion, given him by Tarakaksha. They waited outside the mansions of his four disciples in the three cities. They waited eagerly for initiation, never suspecting they were to be deluded by Vishnu's maaya hidden in each blasphemous mantra of Mayaamoha's surreal shastra.

Arihat said grandly to Mayaa, "Listen to my shastra now, O King, it is the quintessence of the Vedanta. The universe itself is eternal; it is not creation and has no creator. It evolves itself and destroys itself. Brahma,

Vishnu and Siva: none is superior to the rest. For in eating, copulation, sleep and fear, we are alike. When our time comes, we live and perish. Since we are all equals, from Brahma down to the meanest worm, mercy is the greatest virtue and there is no sin like violence. When pain and ignorance end, we find moksha; and if one dies without pain or ignorance that is the greatest bliss."

The crafty Arihat stood the teachings of the Vedas on their head. He went on to the worship of the Gods and demolished that inmost faith. He mocked marital fidelity and preached a bizarre spiritual anarchy of non-violence, mechanical and Godless. Most of all, he preached the equality of men and women in all things. He seduced the minds of the wives of the Tripura with his sophistries, promising them unlimited freedom. Besides, Vishnu's deceptive maaya snaked off his facile tongue.

It took a while, but not very long and all worship, except Arihat's Godless rites, was dead in Tripura. No more was Siva remembered, or his linga adored as before; no more did anyone pray to Vishnu, Surya or Ganesa. The soul of Tripura of dharma shrivelled within its beautiful walls and a vacuous madness occupied the three demon cities. The asuras sinned as usual; but now their sins clung to them, because they did not humble themselves before the great Sivalinga. It stood neglected, a useless antique at the heart of the quarter of worship. Betraying their marriage vows, hedonistic asuras lay at the very temple doors, shamelessly fornicating with women who were not their wives. This was the free preaching of Arihat, their guru.

Satisfied that Mayaamoha's work of corruption was well done, Vishnu went to Kailasa with the devas. Bowing to Siva, who sat with Nandin, Narayana said, "Obeisance, Parabrahman!"

A smile touching his lips, Siva said, "I have heard something of what goes on in Tripura. You Hari, or you Brahma, may kill the asuras. They are not my bhaktas any more and I do not protect them."

Brahma said, "The asuras have desolated sacred Nandana, they have taken Rambha and the apsaras to their debauched harems. They have taken Indra's elephants Kumuda, Anjana, Vamana and Airavata, seized the devas' foam-born horses and unaccountable wealth during their savage raids. But they cannot be vanquished in battle or slain by anyone except you, Mahadeva. I myself gave them that boon."

Rudra retorted, "What Mahadeva? Brahma, if I was truly Mahadeva, I would have at least a vimana from which to loose my astra."

They bowed to him, smiling. "The chariot shall be ready, O Bhava."

"Then so shall I," said he.

Viswakarma created that vimana for Siva out of the stuff of kaala, the devas' divine time. That craft was golden and silver, like a diamond of infinite facets; its one engine was the sun and the other the moon. The adityas presided over the side of the sun and the digits of the moon and the nakshatras over the other. The six seasons were the rim of the chariot; its pushkara was the sky. The year was its velocity, the solstices were the joints of its wheels and axles, the muhurtas were the junctions and the kaalas the pins of the yoke. The kaashtas were the chariot's nose, the kshanas its axle shaft, the nimeshas its base and the minutest, most fleeting divisions of instants were its poles.

Vyasa, the firmament was the fender of that vimana, heaven and moksha its flagstaves. It was powered by faith and could traverse infinite space or infinite time in a wink. All the devas were part of that chariot; it was made from their astral bodies for the God of Gods. Brahma yoked the Vedas as steeds and brought the resplendent craft to Siva. "We hope this is a vimana fit for you, O Devadeva."

Blazing up in joy and glory, Rudra climbed into the diamond chariot, made with a little of everything that exists in all the worlds. With Brahma himself as their sarathy, they flew up at the speed of time towards the asuras' cities. It was an exceptional day of Pushya, which came once in a thousand years and the Tripura moved together into the sky, joining in slow grace into a single city, bright as a star.

Flying into battle, Siva suddenly cried in a terrible voice, "Be beasts, O Devas and give me lordship over animals if you would vanquish the asuras!"

The devas were terrified: what if they were left bestial forever? They remembered the curse of Dadichi's wife Survacha. Rudra cried exultantly, "I will free you from your animals."

Knowing his mystic meaning, the devas said, "So be it."

Then, Siva was Pasupati, Lord of animals, who liberates them. That Form he assumed when the devas made him Pasupati cannot be described, for he was every beast in all the worlds of creation. With his creatures around him, the devas in their animalhood, four-footed, tailed and clawed,

eyes glowing, snarling and roaring, denizens of a mythic wilderness, Siva went into battle.

In his vimana, quivering like a giant hummingbird hanging in the air, Siva Pasupati strung the Pinaka with an astra that contained the three final fires, Hutasa, Soma and Narayana. He bent his body into pratyahidha, the posture of the archer and waited while the three cities coalesced into a single one against the constellation of Pushyami in the indigo twilight.

The Lord's fingers were still as death on his bowstring and astra; Ganesa sat on his thumb to make it firm. But the Tripura were elusive, the cities would not appear in one image before Siva's eye of aim. A voice spoke out of the air, an asariri, "Lord of the universe, you shall not burn the Tripura until Ganesa is worshipped."

Rudra bowed, palms folded, before Ganapathy, his wise son. When he raised his face again, he saw there were not three separate cities in the sky, only one. The devas, who had fallen on their faces before the elephant-headed one, cried in triumph, 'Jaya!' Siva strung his bow again with the Paasupatastra and at the auspicious moment, abhilaasa, he drew the bowstring against his ear and hailed the asuras in the Voice of the Pasupati. Fear flashed through the demons, black lightning in their blood. With a report that shook the firmament, Siva loosed his astra, a flaming sun. It pierced the Tripura from below and blazed through the city: that weapon wrought from an occult body of Vishnu's, with Agni at its head, bringing apocalyptic fire.

Palaces and gardens, roads paved with rubies and diamonds, turrets and fountains of gold, silver and iron melted in the inferno. They melted down into some handfuls of ashes. Children playing, old men watching their grandchildren at play, men in their prime in their schools of war and learning, munis, Arihat's converts at lustful dhyana, women in labour, women cooking in their kitchens, women in their beds in the throes of love, their lovers thrusting at their velvet bodies: all these were frozen in a scream in the white flash of Siva's astra. Trailing smoke, battlements and palaces ablaze, the Tripura fell spinning from the great scream in the sky, smouldering into the ocean, hissing when it struck water. It burned pale and bright beneath the waves for many days on the bed of the deeps: such was the fire of Siva's Paasupatastra.

Yet, there were demons in Tripura who, by Siva's own grace, miraculously escaped. There were those that did not fall torched into the

sea, those who called out his name in old remembrance at the moment of terror and others who still worshipped him secretly, even until that final day. These, I have heard, good Vyasa, attained the realm of Ganapathy, who was revered before the astra flamed from Siva's Pinaka. Mayaa, architect of the asuras' destiny, escaped and so did Arihat and his four disciples of the tonsured heads and the weird faith of faithlessness.

Such a silence descended on the worlds after the Tripura fell out of the sky. Only Siva blazed forth, dazzling the ten directions, as he will at the hour when he consumes the universe. The cowering devas whimpered. They saw Uma as well, an emerald-green flame in half Siva's body. He was Androgyne and perfect mystery at that moment, God and Goddess together, bright and dark at once, riding his vimana of Time.

When the resounding silence threatened to finish them all, Brahma said, shaking, "Obeisance, Ardhanariswara of the form of Omkara. Obeisance, Pasupati! Aghora, be calm again, for the devas' work is done."

The devas, who could barely speak, whispered, "Save us, Rudra."

Vishnu bowed to that Cosmic Form and cried in an ecstasy, "Let my bhakti for you grow, Sadasiva!"

Tarakaksha, Mayaa who had been saved by his past devotion, said, "Obeisance Mahadeva, great Kalpavriksha. Obeisance Sankara, O compassionate one. They say you that love being praised, but Lord, I have no words with which to praise you. Bless me, Siva!"

Siva said as thunder, "I am pleased with you, Mayaa, name your boon."

Mayaa prostrated at the Lord's lotus feet. He cried, "Let my bhakti for you be deathless, Rudra. Let no evil ever stir in my heart again."

Siva placed his palm on Mayaa's head, "Be blessed, my bhakta."

And, Vyasa, that Daitya was saved,' said Sanatkumara," said Brahma to his son Narada awash on the living current of the sublime Purana in his soul."

Says Romaharshana to the rishis of Saunaka in the Naimisa vana, in that kalpa.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Jalandhara, Son of the Ocean

Saunaka says to the Suta Romaharshana, "Tell us, O perfect Pauranika, about Siva and the Asura Jalandhara."

Suta begins, "Brahma's eloquent son, Sanatkumara, said to Vyasa who sat at his feet absorbed,

‘Once, Brihaspati and Indra were on their way to Kailasa to see Lord Siva. Suddenly, on a mountain trail, they saw a great and naked rishi whose body shone, whose hair was matted in jata, whose mien was fierce and his skin white as the moon.

Indra said haughtily, "Who are you, fellow, that bar our way? Don't you know who we are? Tell us, Muni, is Siva home on Kailasa?"

The naked rishi scratched himself and said nothing; nor did he move from where he stood. Indra was furious, "Evil fool, dare you mock the king of the devas?"

Indra raised his thunderbolt to strike down that muni, but the wind-clad one made an occult mudra and Indra's hand froze. The rishi's eyes burned red, his body shone a terrifying aura and his brow twitched as if with a separate rage. Brihaspati knew that Siva stood before them and prostrated before the Lord.

"Obeisance, O Destroyer of Daksha's yagna, O three-eyed Kamaghna, O Tripuraari, O Kaalahara, O Vyalin with the black serpents around your body, O Rudra who plucked off Brahma's head, O Agni, O Vayu, O Akasa, O Naara, O Surya, O Soma, O Akhanda, O You who are Brahma and Vishnu, O greater than Prakriti, O Brahmandahridaya, heart of the stars!"

Devaguru Brihaspati pulled the shocked Indra down on his face at the strange ascetic's feet. "Mahadeva, quiet the anger rising in your eye. Indra seeks the refuge of your lotus feet."

In a voice that made Indra tremble, Rudra said, "The fire is risen in my eye, it will not go back."

Indra was speechless and Brihaspati cried, "Bhaktavatsala, take pity on Indra."

Bhaktavatsala, saviour of his devotees, was delighted with his new name and burst out laughing. He raised Brihaspati and Indra, shaking like a leaf, to their feet. Naked Siva said, "Be known as the Enlivener, Brihaspati, you have restored life to Indra today. And this fire in my brow I now give to the Ocean."

He grew tall as the sky, Bhaktavatsala Siva; his face was in the pale sun. With a ringing cry, he plucked the agni from his brow and cast it into the distant sea. Indra and Brihaspati no longer had to climb Kailasa's summit. Siva blessed them on that snowy slope and they went back to their homes in the sky.

The fire from Siva's third eye fell hissing into the Sindhu Sagara sangama, where the Indus meets the Ocean and a splendid boy was born there, at whose cries the world shook. The devas in heaven clapped their hands over their ears. In distant Brahmaloka, beyond the sun, Brahma heard the awful wailing. Brahma and the devas flew down to the earth and saw the exceptional child in Varuna's waving lap. Bright waves embodied, the Ocean came and gave the boy to Brahma. In wonder, the Pitama said, "Who is he, whose son?"

Varuna replied, "One moment he was not there and the next he lay crying at the confluence of river and sea. I do not know where he came from or whose he is. Pitama, you perform his birth rites and read the lines in his palm to tell his fortune."

But that boy seized Brahma by the throat and began to shake his head violently, so tears sprang to the Creator's eyes. Brahma extricated himself from the small and mighty grasp and declared, "He brought tears to my eyes, let him be called Jalandhara."

With the Ocean's help, he prised open the tiny fists and read the lines in the child's palms. Brahma prophesied, "He shall be a youth in a day, for he is a boy of wonder. I have seen only one other hand to rival his in martial prowess. He will be as powerful as Karttikeya; he will defeat Vishnu in battle. He will be the Emperor of the asuras and even Siva will find it hard to kill him, though only Siva can. I cannot tell who this boy's parents are; those lines are missing. But he will have an exquisite wife and her virtue will make him invincible."

Brahma called for Sukra, the guru of the asuras. So sure was he of what he predicted, he set a crown on Jalandhara's little head after performing the birth rites for the child. He returned the boy to the Ocean.

Jalandhara's foster-father was overjoyed and Brahma vanished back to Satyaloka with the devas.

In miraculous time, hours, Jalandhara grew into a magnificent youth. Varuna asked the daitya king, Kaalanemi, for his daughter Vrinda, to be his son's wife. When the young man was married and his shakti with him, the asuras, who had hidden themselves in patala after the devas last vanquished them, crept out into the sun again. They swarmed to Jalandhara in teeming hordes, eager to avenge themselves on the devas, eager to conquer the worlds again. They crowned him their Emperor and he ruled his empire with Sukracharya's blessing.

Once, when Jalandhara sat in his palace with Vrinda and Bhargava, Rahu came to his court and bowed to the Asura sovereign. Rahu was passing strange, because he had no head! Jalandhara softly asked Sukra, "Who did this to Rahu?"

His guru replied, "Vishnu, when the Kshirasagara was churned and the devas cheated our people of the amrita."

When he heard about the churning of the ocean, Jalandhara's eyes turned crimson. He called his messenger, Ghasmara and sent him to Indra with a message.

"Base Deva, you churned my father with the mountain, tormenting him so he gave up his jewels and his nectar, which properly belong to me. I, Jalandhara, command you to return what is mine. Otherwise, face my consequences."

Though he was anxious, Indra replied bravely, "You brag like Shankha, who once threatened me in his arrogance: he died. In my time, I have quelled the pride of so many like you I have lost count of them. My brother Vishnu killed Shankha in the waves of your father, the Sea. If you are not careful, you will meet the same fate."

When he heard the Deva king's message, Jalandhara's howl shook the sky. His lips white, he cried, "Call my asuras to arms! We march at once against the thieves of devaloka."

With ferocious commanders like Sumbha and Nisumbha, Jalandhara marched on devaloka. His monstrous forces camped in Nandana, the enchanted garden outside Amravati and Jalandhara blasted out a challenge on his great sea conch. His demons roared up at the devas behind their ramparts, mocking the gods of light, crying that tonight the deva women would lie in asura beds.

In beautiful formation, Indra's legions streamed out of the gates of Amravati, a brilliant and deadly storm. Maces and fire swords, occult arrows and spears of light flashed in the sun and quickly both forces waded in streams of blood. That battleground was like the sky at scarlet dusk with dark clouds scattered through it: the corpses of elephants and warriors, chariots and horses, the writhing bodies of those struck down but not dead. But the dead did not long remain so on either side. Sukra brought the slain asuras back to life with the amritasanjivini; while, across the bloody field, Brihaspati revived the devas with miraculous herbs from the mountain Drona.

In the heat of battle, Jalandhara cried to Sukra, "How do these devas rise from death? I thought only you had the amritasanjivini vidya."

Sukra said, "It is not the sanjivini that Angiras uses, but the herbs of Drona. If you cast that mountain into the sea, the devas will stay dead."

The son of the Ocean, son of the fire from Siva's eye, withdrew quietly from battle. Secretly, he flew to Mount Drona, pulled up that mountain by its roots and cast it into the sea. Roaring in glee, Jalandhara came back to battle and now there was no containing him. Like a whirlwind thick with blades and shafts, fierce as the fire that sired him, the Asura Emperor fell upon the devas. They fell around him like flies.

When the life-giving herbs from Drona were exhausted by Jalandhara's tide of death, Brihaspati flew to the mountain to gather more. He saw a chasm where the roots of the mountain once plunged into the earth. He flew back to the battle, crying, "Fly, Indra, while you live. The son of the Ocean is the son of Siva's fire!"

The devas fled to a cavern on golden Mount Meru on the earth. Jalandhara entered Amravati in triumph, with asura conches blaring victory, while the deva women cowered in their crystal mansions. Jalandhara pursued the devas to the cave on Meru and they fled from there to Vaikunta. They prostrated before Vishnu and cried, "Obeisance, O long-armed Hrishikesa, O Madhusudana, O Matsya, Kuurma, Varaha, O Vamana, Parasurama, Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, Buddha, Kalki! Obeisance, O Radha's lover in every kalpa, O Lakshmi's lord, O Blue Lotus of the universe of secret lore, O Kapila, O Mahatman! Narayana, Jalandhara has driven us out of devaloka."

Vishnu said thoughtfully, "I will come to fight the Asura."

As he went to mount Garuda, Lakshmi caught his arm. He saw tears in her eyes! The Ocean's daughter sobbed, "How does my brother deserve death at my husband's hands?"

Vishnu wiped her tears. He kissed her softly and whispered, "I cannot kill Jalandhara. He was born from Siva's fire and I can only show him my valour on the field. But for the sake of the devas, I must go."

Vishnu went to battle and the wind from Garuda's wings blew the asuras about like straws in a gale; while, now that Hari led them, the devas flew at the demons with new courage. Jalandhara rallied his asuras, "Stand and fight, my heroes. Stand and fight these cowards of light. My black Mauryas, my Dhumras, my Kaalakeyas, my Daurdhas, my Kankas, stand and they will turn tail. Sumbha, Nisumbha, you are not afraid of these vainglorious weaklings. We will make a sea of their blood today!"

That unequalled Demon charged roaring into the fray, while the deva forces parted helplessly before him like a woman to her lover's thrust. Heads flew off bodies at dramatic trajectories; arms and legs hewn off by sword strokes lay twitching briefly in thickening gore. Bloodcurdling screams rent the air. Axeheads and swordblades flashed in warriors' hands, or lay remorseful on the ground in congealing crimson, in sorrow and expiation, that death had come to those who brandished them.

The devas fled that battle first. From behind their lines, mounted on Garuda, Vishnu came again to the fore. The Sudarshana chakra at his fingertip dazzled the field, blinding the demons. In echoing blasts, the Panchajanya flashed fear through their bodies and from above, the Saringa rained death in a storm. Vishnu's arrows carried asura heads into the sky in bizarre formations, so the other demons whimpered at Narayana's sorcery. Roaring in a voice to shake the sun from the sky like a fruit, Jalandhara charged Vishnu.

Quick as thought, Vishnu garlanded him with a hundred nitid arrows, shafts of blue fire. Roaring horribly, the Ocean's son plucked them from his skin like needles, which pricked but did not wound him. Hari cut down Jalandhara's banner, his royal parasol, his bow and quiver and shot a single deadly shaft straight into the Demon's heart. Grinning, fangs bared, Jalandhara calmly drew that barb right out of his heart; and then Vishnu trembled. With a howl of rage, Jalandhara struck Garuda on the head and felled him, so Hari was mountless on the field. The Demon struck him

back squarely through his breast with his green lance, so the light of his sacred heart was suddenly dimmed.

They fought with cudgel and axe, sword and trident, each ayudha flaming with cosmic agni: blue, green and black with wizardly power. When the weapons were all shattered, they fell on each other with bare hands, the Blue God and the Asura son of Siva and the Ocean. The earth cracked where they fought. Uprooted by the shock of their blows, great trees fell split and lifeless on the ground.

Then, Vishnu, amazed, stood in a benign form before the Asura. Hari said with a smile, "Invincible Jalandhara, I have never fought a hero like you! I will give you any boon you ask, because you have worshipped me with your blows as I have never been worshipped before."

Jalandhara said, "If you are truly pleased, bring my sister Lakshmi and come to stay in my house."

Much to the devas' distress, Vishnu agreed, "I shall."

War against Jalandhara became impossible when Vishnu went to live in his city and the son of the Ocean kept his great brother-in-law and his sister of fascination in his home, with honour and in joy, for years. And Jalandhara ruled the three worlds, patala, bhumi and swarga. He gave his asuras the devas' places on high and Nisumbha lordship of the under-worlds.

From the devas, gandharvas and siddhas, he took their hoarded wealth of jewels and gold and peopled his capital with folk of all races: gandharvas, nagas, rakshasas and men of the earth. Once the devas were conquered, the Demon ruled his worlds wisely. He protected his people, regardless of race or kind, as if they were his own children. In Jalandhara's kingdom, there was no sickness, hunger or indigence, for he was the most just and virtuous of kings.

However, when Jalandhara ruled the worlds, the devas were no more than his slaves and they prayed fervently to Siva Bhaktavatsala to release them from the Demon's yoke. Siva sent Narada to those gods who lived, cowed and humbled, as menials in Jalandhara's fabulous city.

Their glory dim, the devas said in piteous voices, "Maharishi, you see us in our misery: Surya, Soma, Agni and Yama expelled from our places and the asuras ruling time. The devas of Amravati, lords of the elements, are slaves today. Jalandhara must be killed, or we will be slaves forever."

Narada thought for a moment, then said, "Be comforted that your misery will not last much longer."

Narada went to Jalandhara's court, the focus of his power. Jalandhara received the wanderer reverently. Standing when the rishi entered, he showed him to a throne of honour. Then, smiling indulgently, he said, "Brahmana, to what do we owe this privilege? How may I serve you?"

A beaming Narada replied, "Lord of the worlds, blessed Jalandhara of the tremendous intellect, peerless Emperor of the daityas and danavas, there is indeed something you can do not only for me, your admirer and well-wisher, but for yourself. Listen carefully. On my wanderings, recently, I climbed to the summit of Mount Kailasa. There, in a grove of kalpavrikshas, amongst a hundred kamadhenus, a vana illumined at night by chintamanis and with gold strewn casually about, I saw the fair and three-eyed Siva with his Parvati. O Daitya, I thought, 'Nowhere in the three worlds is there such grandeur!' Then, I remembered, 'What of Jalandhara, lord of the asuras? Surely, he can match Siva's glory.' And so, I came here to see for myself."

Narada paused and Jalandhara leaned forward and cried, "And what do you find?"

Avuncular Narada patted the Ocean son's hand and said, "Your wealth more than equals Siva's. Airavata graces your stables and Uchchaisravas; Indra's Parijata grows in your garden. Kubera's treasures are in your coffers and Brahma's swan chariot waits at your door. Jalandhara, unrivalled indeed is your sovereignty of the worlds. Yet, there is one possession you do not have, the most prized one: the one that would be the crown jewel of all the rest. You do not have a wife like Uma!"

Jalandhara's eyes bulged. He cried, "Where is she?"

Narada smiled conspiratorially. Softly, he said, "How she, who is so completely beautiful, lives with that naked yogin I will never understand. She deserves better: she deserves none less than the greatest of men. She deserves the Emperor of the universe for her husband!"

Jalandhara sat bemused, his eyes dreamy. Seeing his work well done, Narada sighed and rose. "Well, there is no remedy for that: Siva, who has no need of her, enjoys her fortune. And now, O King who would be truly peerless if only Uma were at your side, I must be on my way."

When Narada had gone, Jalandhara called Rahu. His time to die drawn near, the Asura said to his messenger, "Go, Rahu, to Mount Kailasa.

There you will find an ash-smeared rishi called Siva, with matted jata and entirely calm. Say fearlessly to him, 'Yogin, Sea of mercy, of what use to you is such a beautiful wife? It is not proper that she lives with you, her beauty hidden among your ghosts and goblins. Jalandhara, master of the worlds, already owns Kubera's Mahapadma, Indra's Airavata and Parijata, Surya's Ucchaisravas, Brahma's hamsa ratha, Varuna's paasa, Mrityu's danda and Agni's immortal garments burnt pure in his fire. It is only just that you give Parvati to him.'"

Rahu went to Kailasa and was shown into Siva's presence. The Lord sat among his ganas in a cave deep in the mountainside, which he lit up with the radiance of his ash-coated body. Rahu stood awestruck and silent before Mahadeva, who said kindly, "Speak, what have you come for?"

Taking a deep breath, Rahu said, "I come from Jalandhara, monarch of the worlds. My lord says to you, Rudra, 'How can you, who live in a cremation ground, a naked yogin with garlands of bones around your throat, be a husband to Himalaya's exquisite daughter? I, Jalandhara, am the owner of everything beautiful in the universe. You are my subject and I command you: send Parvati to me!'"

Siva did not turn a hair and the slight smile played steadily on his face, in the hush that fell in that cave. Then, there was a crack of thunder, a blinding flash of light and his third eye glared open for an instant. From it, sprang a horrible being with a lion's face and a fanged mouth from which a snake's forked tongue flickered. The creature's tawny eyes shed flames. With a wail, it leapt at Rahu even as the Narasimha had at Hiranyakashyapu! Rahu fled. The monster caught him near the cave mouth and yawned its jaws wide as that entrance to devour the demon. Jalandhara's messenger cried, "Mahadeva, save me!"

Siva ordered the beast, "Let the brahmana go, he seeks our protection."

At the word 'brahmana', the creature dropped Rahu on the floor in a heap and stood aside, slaving and growling so the cave echoed with his unappeased hunger. Groaning as if in pain, that creature came near Siva and said in a strangled whisper, "You snatched the prey I was born for from my jaws. Siva, my hunger is unbearable, what shall I eat to appease it?"

Siva said in annoyance, "If you are so tormented, eat yourself!"

At which, with a grateful growl and quickly with loud crunching of bone, champing of flesh and slurping of blood, the fiend ate himself before the astonished eyes of the others. Only his lion's head remained suspended in the air, licking its lips in satisfaction! Siva roared with laughter. He cried delightedly, "Oh, most unique monster! I name you Kirtimukha, face of fame. From now, you shall be my dwarapalaka and you shall be worshipped first of all, by anyone that wants to worship me."

Said Sanatkumara to his mesmerised audience of one, his pupil Vyasa, my master to whom Brahma's august son taught the sacred Purana."

Suta Romaharshana, peerless Pauranika, says to the rishis of the Naimisa, holiest of forests.

THIRTY-NINE

The seduction of Vrinda

Suta says,

"Enthralled, Vyasa cried, 'Resplendent son of Brahma, O Sanatkumara of infinite gyana, what happened after Siva spared Rahu's life?'

Sanatkumara said, 'Slowly and thoughtfully, Rahu made his way back to Jalandhara. Reluctantly, he told the Ocean's son what had chanced with him on Kailasa. Springing to his feet, eyes afire, Jalandhara roared as fiercely as Kirtimukha, "Call out my army! My generals Kaalanemi, Sumbha and Nisumbha, the sons of Kotivara, the scions of Kambu, the Daurdhas, the Kaalakas, the Mauryas and the Dhaurmas shall march on Kailasa. Today!"

As he climbed down from his throne, Jalandhara stumbled and his crown fell from his head with a clatter. Sukra and Rahu rode ahead of their king that day. They saw the sky was dark with clouds, jackals howled at them and vultures wheeled overhead. Such was Jalandhara's rage and his lust, he ignored those omens of the great slumber. Making themselves invisible, the devas fled to Kailasa; bound by Hari's boon to Jalandhara, Vishnu and Lakshmi stayed on in his palace.

Prostrating himself, Indra cried abjectly to Rudra, "Jalandhara is coming to attack you, O Siva and Vishnu stays in the Asura's palace as his guest."

Siva said quietly, "Consider Jalandhara dead, for what his messenger Rahu said to me."

Siva sent the devas home. The daitya Emperor arrived at his gates with his oceanic army and stood roaring like Yama. With a signal of thought, Siva mustered his own gana forces, led by Nandin, Vighneswara and Karttikeya. The two armies met on the holy mountain. Sword rang on sword, axe against axe; severed heads bounced down the white slopes in macabre pageant.

Quickly, the fair ridges were crimson. The earth below trembled with the sankhas and mridangas of war, the battle tramp of warriors and

elephants and the hooves of horses swift as sound. The air was brisk with feathered spear, arrow and astras of many hues and flames. The mountain was strewn with fallen weapons and hewn-off heads like rubies. Amidst battlecries and the screams of brutal death, the ground was a marsh of melting ice and suets and blood.

Sukra resuscitated his felled asuras with the sanjivini. Their dissevered heads barely steady on their necks, they came roaring out of death into battle again! The ganas grew terrified at the demons rising like that and brought word to Rudra. He screamed as if he had been pierced by a weapon. His body burned in wrath, ruddy on the mountain and from his fiery mouth sprang an awful kritya; her limbs were thick as palmyras, her mouth was a cave. She crushed rough tree-trunks between her breasts to scratch herself and flew screeching into battle.

After swallowing a few columns of asuras, she seemed dissatisfied. Throwing her head this way and that in frenzy, seeking her prey, the one she had come for, she stood motionless at the heart of the war. There was a shocked pause around her. Siva's own ganas shrank back, worried that she might turn on them if they took her hideous fancy. Suddenly, with a delighted cry, she saw Sukra Bhargava. Swooping on him like light, she snatched him up. Crooning in almost conjugal joy, the kritya spread her legs wide, straddling the very mountain. With a moan, she thrust a screaming Bhargava into her vagina and she flew up into the sky and away.

The asuras were panic-stricken. They fled the battle, because now the ganas were at them like a high wind among scythed grasses, scattering them everywhere. From behind the asura lines, stemming their flight as a dam with three awesome pillars might a river, came Kaalanemi, Sumbha and Nisumbha. Their arrows were locust swarms in the sky and the ganas their prey. Quickly, the gana ranks resembled the scarlet fields of the kimsuka of spring. Siva's legions turned tail and, whooping in delight, the asuras chased them.

Nandiswara, Ganesa and Karttikeya rose at the rear of the gana army, a triune whirlwind. Kaalanemi and Nandin came face to face, Ganapathy and Sumbha and, with an ululating cry, Nisumbha charged Kumara. Weapons flashed in pale sun and snow. Nisumbha struck Karttikeya's peacock in its chest with six smoking arrows and it fell senseless. In a flash, with a clutch of fire shafts, Kumara cut down Nisumbha's chariot, horses and sarathy. Siva's son pierced the asura general's chest squarely

with another blue arrow. Drawing the livid barb out with one hand, the undaunted asura cast his flaming spear at Kumara and struck him deep in his side.

Nandin devastated Kaalanemi's horses and chariot with seven lightning bolts. Kaalanemi shattered Nandin's bow with a single whistling shaft. Nandin rushed at the daitya and struck him with his lance of slim light; blood spurted from the demon general. With a roar, the Danava grew to a stupendous size. He broke the peak off a nearby mountain and crashed it down on Nandin's head.

Riding a sky chariot and a mouse, Sumbha and Ganapathy fought with occult missiles, humming like swarms of black bees. To Sumbha's dismay, he suddenly saw his charioteer's head, taken from its trunk by one of Ganesa's brilliant arrows, fly through the air and land in the snow, a grisly ball of blood and brains. As his sleek vimana collapsed, Sumbha pierced Ganapathy's mouse with three calific astras. The creature squealed in agony. It trembled violently, as a wounded mouse will, so Ganesa was thrown from its back. With a roar, which echoed from the mountainsides, Ganesa felled Sumbha with an axe. He clambered back on to the mouse, which seemed to have recovered: fighting on foot and carrying his own weight did not appeal to the elephant-headed lord of the ganas at all! He mocked the fallen Sumbha, prodding him with a spear as a hunter does a leopard in his trap.

Without warning, Kaalanemi shot Ganesa treacherously from behind with a shakti of darkness, like a serpent. Seeing Ganapathy fall, with a roar to eclipse every effort gone before, Virabhadra charged into battle at the head of a thousand goblins, kusmandas, bhairavas, vetalas, yoginis, pichasas and dakinis! The mountain quaked with tigerish roars and womanly screams, as the bhutas ran amok. They danced and sang nightmarishly; they leapt a hundred feet into the air and turned giant cartwheels. And they swallowed the asuras they caught, as pythons do birds. Ganesa awoke and stormed back into battle.

Now Karttikeya, Ganesa, Nandin and Virabhadra fought side by side and back to back and they could not be taken unawares anymore. Time's reapers, they mowed the asuras down. Their demons falling around them in thousands every moment, Sumbha, Nisumbha and Kaalanemi began to give ground to the gana forces. Then, with a ringing cry from the air,

Jalandhara erupted on the encounter in a rainbow chariot, bringing death in a swathe of arrows that filled the space between heaven and earth.

Jalandhara struck Nandin and Ganapathy with five arrows each and Virabhadra with twenty. From a distance, Karttikeya cast Agni's spear like light at the son of the Ocean. It pierced his breast and he fell, his eyes rolling up. But in a moment, pulling the lance from his flesh, grinding his teeth and gasping in pain, the Emperor of the asuras was on his feet again, his wound closing bloodlessly. As he rose, he flung his mace at Kumara, knocking him unconscious. That mace flew on towards Ganesa, who splintered it with a missile.

Virabhadra struck Jalandhara with three arrows and cut down his banner and horses with seven whining astras. The Daitya felled Ganapathy with a feminine shakti and he mounted another chariot, which appeared for him out of nowhere. Shining like twin suns over the mountain, Virabhadra and Jalandhara fought with arrows that stopped other arrows and astras that did complex, incandescent battle by themselves in the air. Virabhadra cut down the Asura's horses for the second time. Losing control, the Demon sprang from his shattered chariot and charged the gana, surprising him. He struck Virabhadra with an iron cudgel, smashing one side of his head, so he fell vomiting blood.

When Virabhadra fell, the ganas fled shrieking to Siva. For here surely was an adversary worthy not of them, but of their Lord himself. Then, in a truly terrible form, mounted on his bull, Siva came to battle. The ganas returned with him, their morale restored that now Rudra himself would lead them. When Siva came to fight, the daityas fled: they saw he was more awesome than they had dreamt. They could not have imagined anyone like him until they saw him on his swaying mount.

A million sorcerous arrows they shot at Siva: Jalandhara, Sumbha, Nisumbha, Kaalanemi, Khadgaroma, Balahaka, Ghasmara, Prachanda and the others. Filigree net of darkness, the death shafts drifted down from the sky. With a laugh that turned the demons' blood to ice, Rudra split the net at its seams and the arrows fell headless around him and his ganas, harmless as flowers. In the awestruck silence, Siva roared once, more reverberantly than any other sound of the day. Then, he was at them like Death's tempest. His arrows found their hearts, his axe glinted across the steep and icy battleground, his sword and trident sang in blood and the horns of his hillocky bull disembowelled screaming daityas everywhere.

Rudra lopped off Khadgaroma's head with his axe. With a casual blow of his club, he smashed Balahaka's head into dripping pulp. Ghasmara suddenly found himself ensnared in Siva's noose and dashed to the ground, again and again, until life left him with a sigh. The trisula truncated Prachanda in three slivers; all the while, like ceaseless rain, Siva's arrows slew thousands of lesser asuras.

Jalandhara rode forth again, mocking his generals, "What use is the pedigree of your mothers, of which you boast so much? You call yourselves great heroes at home and run like rabbits in battle. You will not go to heaven if die as cowards. O Asuras of little stature, you are loath to die because dreams of fornication linger in your flesh. Don't you know that death in battle is moksha? Have you lost your minds, that you are afraid of death? Death gives everything; it sets you free, fools. Come joyfully to battle, my Daityas, for death is preferable to shame!"

But his demons were so afraid of Siva they cried, "Rudra is more terrible than death!"

They would not come back to fight, but stood shivering like frightened children. Jalandhara blew his conch and hailed Siva, "Come then, Yogin, fight me! What use is it killing these cowards? Come, show me whatever meagre strength you have."

Jalandhara aimed a brace of venomous arrows at Siva's head. They fell like lotus blossoms around the Auspicious One. With a smile on his sweet lips, Siva stood unmoving at the heart of the battlefield. No one saw him raise his bow and shoot an arrow. But abruptly, Jalandhara's chariot was smashed, his charioteer and horses lay in pools of blood. The Asura rushed at Rudra with his mace aloft. Again, with such speed that no one saw anything, Siva cut the mace in five pieces with his arrows. With a howl, Jalandhara raised a fist of spiked mail to strike Rudra. Once more, with undiscernible swiftness, Siva's arrows plucked the Demon up by his armour and flung him back a krosa.

Jalandhara now resorted to the maaya his guru Bhargava had taught him, the sorcery to which he was born. Suddenly, Siva saw wonderful hosts of gandharvas and apsaras, singing and dancing just for him. Though he knew at once that this was Jalandhara's maaya, the enchantment was so powerful he could not shake it off. He sat on his bull, bewitched, thinking that never before had he heard such music or seen such dancing. The weapons slipped from his hands, as the caress of flute, mridanga and vina

engulfed him and the sight of apsaras' sinuous limbs, swaying hypnotically.

Seeing his chance, while Siva sat bemused, Jalandhara left Sumbha, Nisumbha and Kaalanemi to mind the battle. Assuming, also with maaya, Rudra's very form, the Demon flew to Uma of the mountain.

She was with her sakhis; seeing Siva, she waved them away and Parvati ran to him alone. Telling himself she had never been loved by a warrior, but only a yogin, the Daitya born from Siva's eye-fire had come to thrust himself upon her. When he saw Kaali, a surge of lust overwhelmed Jalandhara. Not touching him, only thinking for a moment that he was her husband, Uma's love for Siva swept into Jalandhara in a riptide: unmanned, the Asura ejaculated helplessly on to the ground.

Uma saw him tremble and his eyes glaze over. She saw his seed spurt from him and she vanished from there with a cry. She fled to a sanctuary on the northern shore of the Manasarovara. There she prayed to Vishnu and he appeared before her. Parvati cried, "Hari, did you see how the devil tried to seduce me, while Siva is under his spell?"

Vishnu saw what had happened in his mind's eye. He said, "Jalandhara must be killed."

Leaning forward eagerly, Uma said, "He has shown us the way himself."

Vishnu asked, "How is that?"

Uma said, "Narayana, in all the world there is no virtue to equal chastity, no power to equal its power. It is Vrinda's chastity that makes Jalandhara invincible."

She paused and there was a knowing gleam in Vishnu's eye. He knew why she had called him here, not Siva out of his trance. Hari asked slowly, "If Vrinda's chastity is violated, Jalandhara can be killed?"

Uma smiled. Vishnu bowed and vanished from her presence. He went back to Jalandhara's city, named after the Demon. He came as a muni and settled himself in some woods outside the city gates. Now he had to fetch Vrinda out to him; to the blue master of Maaya herself that posed no problem.

That night, nightmare after nightmare ravaged Vrinda, tearing through her sleep. First, she saw her husband anointed with oil and riding naked on a black buffalo. His head was shaven; he wore a garland of black flowers. A group of mourning asuras surrounded him and he was

enveloped in darkness. Vrinda awoke, bathed in sweat. She rang for her maids to come and sleep in her room. Though they left the taper burning, more evil dreams visited the queen.

Repeatedly, she saw her husband riding the black buffalo, Yama's beast. Near dawn, another nightmare woke her screaming. She had seen their city, Jalandhara and herself sink beneath the ocean. Outside her window, she saw the sun rising with a dark hole at its heart and the chaste Vrinda dissolved in tears. She kept crying, "Where is my husband? Oh, we are doomed, we are doomed."

Her maids took her into the fresh air, out to the terraces around the palace. She was disconsolate and restive. They took her into the city's green parks, but she had no peace. Her hands shook, her body perspired profusely and time and again she burst into tears. Finally, two of her sakhis took her into the woods beyond the city to distract her. They walked a fair way, while she spoke no word but only wept from time to time, utterly miserable and convinced that doom was round the corner.

Suddenly, from behind some trees two lion-faced demons, naked and plainly aroused, sprang howling at the queen and her women. Sakhis and mistress fled in different directions. Wailing, Vrinda ran straight into the arms of a rishi, who turned calmly on the devils and chased them away with a deep humkara.

The sage comforted Vrinda, "Don't cry, my child, don't cry. They have gone."

When he had fetched water for her from the river and she had a sip or two, Vrinda still sobbed. The rishi said, "Why not share your sorrow with me?"

Vrinda fell at his feet and cried, "Maharishi, my husband Jalandhara is at war against Siva and I fear for his life."

The rishi shut his eyes in dhyana. He stood unmoving, until two monkeys dropped down before them from the trees. The sage seemed fluent in their gibbering tongue. He spoke to them, giving instructions. The monkeys scampered back into the trees. Then they flew straight up into the sky and were gone.

Vrinda asked, "What is this, holy one?"

The muni made a sign of blessing over her head. He said gravely, "Everything will be known about your husband."

They waited only moments, when they heard the monkeys chattering above them again. Now, they carried something in their arms. Leaping down nimbly, the creatures set Jalandhara's body and head, severed from each other, at the sage's feet. Vrinda fell on them with a cry. "Oh speak to me, Jalandhara! Son of the Ocean, has a naked yogin conquered the master of the worlds? I told you Siva is the Parabrahman. But you did not listen and now you are dead."

She grasped the muni's hand. She fell on her knees before him, "Mighty Rishi, bring my husband back to life. I know you have the power!"

She fell at his feet in a swoon. When Vrinda came to her senses, the kindly hermit had vanished and a living Jalandhara cradled her head in his lap. Tenderly, her husband stroked her face and whispered words of love to her. When she tried to speak, a smile like the sun at dawn breaking on her teary face, he stopped her mouth with his own. With new fire, his powerful hands moved over her body, his lips moved down her throat and, moaning, she was lost to the world. He loved her in that clearing in the woods as he had never loved her before. Her cries brought the woodland creatures out to stare. Only when a screaming climax wracked her body, tossing it on a tide of rapture, she saw that his skin had turned as blue as the night lotus that blooms on secret pools in the heart of the vana. Springing to her feet with a snarl that shook Vishnu, she cursed him. "Vile deceiver, defiler of my virtue! May the two fiends you had chase me, abduct your own woman in another life. And may you seek the help of monkeys in a lonely forest."

She would have said more, but the look in his eyes stopped her: she saw he had fallen in love with her! Vrinda shook her head in wonder, because she knew who he was. But then, she created a fire with her yogic power. Before he could stop her, she walked into it and was ashes before his frantic eyes. In a streak of light, Vrinda's spirit was absorbed into Uma. But Vishnu stood numb, heedless of the devas and gandharvas who shouted 'Jaya!' and hailed him their saviour. Smoke and ashes from her pyre covered his face in a mask and tears ran wet courses down his cheeks.'

Sanatkumara paused in his tale. Vyasa's eyes and his grave heart were full."

Says the Suta to his sage audience in the Naimisa.

FORTY

The plants of love

"Unequalled Romaharshana, most poetic of your guru's sishyas, what happened then?"

Suta says,

"Sanatkumara said to Vyasa, thirsting for the matchless Siva Purana, 'When Parvati vanished before his lustful eyes, Jalandhara's spell of gandharvas and apsaras fell away from Siva and he knew the Demon had deceived him with maaya. Jalandhara reappeared on the field of battle, but weakened by his shameful ejaculation. Deep in his heart, was the anxiety that even if Uma had become his how would he satisfy her? When just the sight of her made him spend his seed. With a terrible roar, Siva attacked Jalandhara. The Asura greeted him with another hallucination. Rudra saw Uma a captive, tethered to the Demon's chariot, while the gloating generals Sumbha, Nisumbha and Kaalanemi fondled her lecherously. The common daitya foot soldiers had their hands on her and she sobbed and sobbed, gnashing her teeth, tossing her head in rage and anguish. But she could not scream: they had bound her mouth with a dark cloth.

Siva stopped numb at this illusion. Jalandhara struck his chest with an astra. Two shafts more pierced Rudra's head and his belly, burying themselves to their feathers, spreading fire through his body. Siva plucked them out like thorns and, as he did, he grew before the awestruck demon army into a vast and wild form, its head scraping the sky. Whimpering, Kaalanemi, Sumbha and Nisumbha fled. They could not bear the terror of that Form.

He howled after them, "I will not kill you while you fly like cowards. But one day, Uma will, for mocking her."

Jalandhara's illusion vanished when Siva grew like that. The son of the Ocean obscured the sky with a mantle of arrows, so day turned to night and darkness fell upon the battle. A gasp of fright rose from the gana army. Siva's archery in reply was like the sun rising to dispel the night. The sorceries leaked out from Jalandhara's weapons and they fell harmlessly on Rudra's people. As night became day, the Demon Emperor also grew as

tall as Meru and he fetched Nandin a blow with his iron club. The bull's legs turned to water and he settled on the ground with a dismal bellow. No matter how Siva tried to rouse him, he could not get up.

Siva cried out in fury and his body was full of terrible light, burning like the fires at the end of time. The last straggles of the daitya army, the sturdiest warriors, fled screaming. Only the Ocean's son still stood his ground. In his reluctant father's heart, Siva knew that the child of his eye-fire must die. He dipped his big toe in the shallow sea and, dragging it in a circle, made a wheel of water. Smiling awfully, he said to Jalandhara, "Daitya, bear this water wheel first, then we will see how you fight me."

Jalandhara growled. Fearlessly, he cried, "After I drink your water wheel, Siva, I will drink your blood. Then I will deal with your puny army as Garuda does with snakes that slither on the ground. Rudra, when I was a baby I brought tears to Brahma's eyes and you hope to stand against me. I am Jalandhara, conqueror of Vishnu. I am the son of the Ocean, Emperor of the worlds!"

Siva flicked his foot forward and the chakra of water flew humming at Jalandhara. Even as he opened his mouth to boast again, the fluid wheel struck his head from his body. A scream of surprise froze on the lips that had commanded the three worlds. A white fire issued from Jalandhara's gaping throat and with a wail, flashed back into Siva's body from where that Demon had once begun. Then blood sprang from him in geysers, flowed in rivers, turning the white mountain scarlet.

Flowers from heaven, from the grateful devas, cascaded upon Siva's head, incandescent with the slaying of the Asura. Music and dance, now by real gandharvas and apsaras, broke out in the sky where the celestial ones had gathered. The devas sang:

*"You are Prakriti and Purusha,
Perfect One, O Mahadeva!
We are your servants forever,
Protect us always, O Siva!"*

Siva said wryly, "For you, I slew Jalandhara who was a part of me."

Amidst the delirium of release, of worship with fevered song and dance, Brahma said quietly, "Vishnu has smeared himself with ashes from Vrinda's pyre and seems to have lost his mind. He wanders naked in the forest weeping and calling her name. You must help him."

Siva said slowly, "Shakti is the illusion of such love: Mulaprakriti ties and unties these knots. Seek her help for Hari; sing her praises until she frees him."

His work done, Siva vanished from the gory field. The devas worshipped the Devi for Vishnu's sake. They lay on their faces, they prayed. "We worship you, O primordial Prakriti from whom the three gunas came, which cause creation, sustenance and destruction! We worship you, by whose desire the universe evolves and dissolves. O Durga of deepest mystery, O unknowable Maaye, we beg your favour for our Lord Vishnu. He stays mourning beside dead Vrinda's pyre. He has smeared himself with her ashes and no one can turn him away from that place, O Kaali."

A blinding sphere of light appeared above them; a great female voice spoke to them out of the sky. "Uma, Lakshmi and Saraswati am I and they shall help you."

The light vanished. The devas worshipped the three Goddesses, who came shimmering before them. The Devis gave them three seeds and said, "Sow these around Vishnu and he will be well again."

The devas sowed the brilliant seeds around Hari who sat lost in the memory of Vrinda. From the seeds of Saraswati, Uma and Lakshmi, three wonderful plants sprang up around him at midnight: the Dhatri, the Tulasi and the Malati. They were woman plants, exquisite and naked. Full of love, they came by moonlight, enfolding Hari in green caresses, stirring him into desire from his stupor of grief. With tendril hands, leaf-tongued kisses and petal fellatio they woke him back into the passion in which he was frozen when Vrinda ashed herself. Friend Vyasa, entwined in their feminine myths of old earth, moonbeams, emerald shoot and precious sap, Vishnu fell to frenzied love. He roared in ecstasy for the wild lovemaking of the divine woman plants.

Suddenly, invaded by subtle envy and strange propriety, the Mallika from Lakshmi's seed disentangled herself from the febrile knot of Blue God and jade plant. Trembling in her every delicate leaf and stem, she stood apart, resentful, her breast heaving. The Dhatri and the Tulasi continued to delight Vishnu, in threshing tumult upon tumult, beside Vrinda's very pyre. Ever since, the Malati has been called Varvari and is never offered at the worship of Hari.

Where Vrinda died, there grew from Vishnu's love and her final moment of enchantment with him, a mighty vana named after her. In a distant incarnation, he would roam the green labyrinths of that forest with Radha and the gopis, while, like a lover, Vrinda enfolded him in her velvet darkness again. For at the decisive moment, when the fire ashed her, she realised that she had never been loved as Hari had loved her so briefly. Just as he knew that if, to begin with, his mission had only been treacherous, once he held her chaste, angular body in his arms the passion he discovered in her would never fade, from his immortal memory.

When he was seduced from his grief by Shakti's love plants, Vishnu went back to Vaikunta. He was himself again. He dreamt often of the death-sweet fire of Vrinda's loving, but now she was where she belonged: a memory that could often make him cry, but not one which could delude him so he forgot who he was.

O Son of the noble Parasara, this is no common tale but one that burns sins and confers every wish of his heart to one who listens to it with devotion. It enshrines knowledge in the soul and diminishes lust. He who reads or teaches this tale long enough, finds even moksha. And he who hears it before he goes to war will surely return victorious. This tale confers bhakti on those who lack it!

Said Sanatkumara, to the absorbed sage."

Says Suta Romaharshana, in profound calm, to Saunaka's rishis in that kalpa, in the sacred Naimisa vana where Brahma's wheel of fire once fell.

FORTY-ONE

Shankhachuda

‘O Vyasa, listen to another tale of Siva, with bhakti,’ said Sanatkumara, Brahma’s august son, once, to the island-born Dwaipayana, aspiring pauranika, son of the Brahmarishi and the fishergirl,’ Romaharshana says, in flow deep as the Ganga’s.

‘Out of my love for you and seeing your absorption, I reveal this legend to you. Marichi’s son and Brahma’s grandson, Kashyapa, was a prajapati, a creator of profound wisdom, to whom Daksha gave thirteen of his daughters in marriage. So multitudinous are the descendants of those women, it is futile to try to enumerate them. Among Kashyapa’s wives was Danu, the beautiful, the chaste. Innumerable sons of awesome power were born to her by Kashyapa’s seed. He was both her cousin and her husband and one of those sons was Viprachitti of untold valour.

Viprachitti’s son was the perfectly restrained Dambha, one of Vishnu’s great bhaktas. But he had no son. Distraught, he went to his guru Sukra and imbibed the Krishna mantra from him. Then, Dambha went to sacred Pushkara and performed a fervid tapasya for a hundred thousand human years. As he sat in padmasana, the mantra never off his lips, the fire of his penance illumined his head, like a great jewel lit from within by its own flame. Quickly, the light spilled from him and pervaded the sky and all creation. So unwavering was his dhyana, it focused not just his own spirit but the soul of the universe.

Scorched by that light, the devas, the siddhas, the manus and other heavenly ones came with Brahma to Vaikunta. "Hari, we fear the pralaya is upon us. What else can this unnatural refulgence portend?"

Narayana laughed. "It is only Dambha praying for a son. I will quieten him."

Vishnu appeared, iridescent, before Dambha in Pushkara. "I am pleased with your tapasya, Asura, name your boon."

"Lord of Gods, Lord of Lakshmi, bless me with a son who will be your bhakta. Give me a powerful boy who will be invincible against the devas and conquer the three worlds."

"So be it. Now stop your tapasya," said Vishnu and vanished like a dream at waking.

Within a week of his return, Dambha's wife became pregnant and she glowed with the brilliant child in her womb. When his boy was born, Dambha named him Shankhachuda. From the beginning, Shankhachuda was an exceptional child. He mastered all of the ancient lore with such ease his gurus were dumbfounded. The boy seemed to know beforehand everything they had to teach him, mathematics or astronomy, the scriptures or archery. Such was his charm, that he quickly became the favourite child in his family. When the youth was almost a man, his guru Jaigasavya sent him to Pushkara to perform a tapasya to Brahma. For countless years, Shankhachuda sat in the lotus posture, chanting the Brahma mantra. Finally, clad in a flowing white robe, the Pitama stood before the Danava like blue fire.

"Tell me the boon you want," said the Creator.

"Let me be invincible against the devas."

Laying a divine palm on his head, Brahma blessed him. So taken was he with that handsome youth, he gave him Krishna's feather-light kavacha, most magical, impenetrable armour in the universe. Brahma said, "Go to Badari and you will find Dharmadhvaja's daughter Tulasi at tapasya. She will be your wife."

Brahma evaporated from his presence. The delighted Shankhachuda strapped on Krishna's armour and journeyed to Badarikasrama. When he saw the lovely Tulasi, he went straight up to her. "Who are you? Why do you sit here in mowna?"

In her throaty voice of the hills, she said, "I am Dharmadhvaja's daughter Tulasi and I am a yogini. Be on your way, warrior, it is dangerous to come near a woman. A woman is a false fetter of fascination, even to Brahma!"

But her eyes belied her words and she smiled at him so bewitchingly that he was lost at once. To persuade her, as if she needed persuading, Shankhachuda said, "What you say is partly true indeed. But Devi, you seem to be the chastest of women and I have come here at Brahma's behest. Tulasi, I am Shankhachuda, the son of Dambha, of the danavas born from Danu. And I will marry you in gandharva vivaha."

Tulasi looked down demurely, for he had passed her test to discover if he was weak or strong. All at once, Brahma stood before them. "You are

born for each other, take her for your wife, Shankhachuda. Who but a brute will not embrace happiness when it appears so enchanting before him? This Danava will rule the worlds and not age or death shall have him as long as he either wears Krishna's kavacha, or you, Tulasi, are faithful to him."

When Shankhachuda came home with Tulasi, Sukra crowned him Emperor of the asuras. With an endless army of daityas, danavas and rakshasas, Shankhachuda set out for Amravati. With Brahma's boon, he vanquished Indra's devas and seized dominion of the worlds. Like every great asura Emperor before him, Shankhachuda appointed his demons to rule in place of Kubera, Surya, Soma, Agni, Yama, Vayu and Varuna. He himself ascended Indra's throne.

Like the reigns of so many wise asuras, his was a rule of peace and plenty. No famine, plague or other pestilence entered his realm. No planets in the heavens shone down a baleful light on the world. The land was fruitful without being tilled; the ocean yielded its most precious jewels. The people were joyful in love and lovemaking and, all her rivers flowing pure, the earth seemed blessed with a perennial spring.

Except the devas, routed and hiding in obscure mountain caves, everyone was happy during Shankachuda's reign. The truth was that, though in this birth he was born a danava, in his last life, in another kalpa, he was Krishna's friend, Sudama, a gopa in Vrindavana whom Radha once cursed to be born as a demon. He was an ardent Krishna bhakta once and so he received Krishna's armour from Brahma. Neither Shankachuda's nature nor his rule was demonic and his queen had no rival for her beauty and chastity. She was his life's muse, the secret of his power, the delight of his bed.

The devas went to Vishnu for succour. "Vaikuntanatha, save us! Govinda who are the very breath of your bhaktas, we seek sanctuary in you."

They wept before him. Vishnu said kindly, "Siva is the one you need. For Krishna, whose kavacha Shankhachuda wears, is Mahadeva's friend and lives near him."

The devas went by an aerial path, paved with padmaraga and symantaka, to Sivaloka. Siva sat with Parvati in an unearthly palace of lofty doorways, each guarded by a white, five-faced, three-eyed, ten-armed, blue-throated, trisula-wielding, ash-smeared, rudraksha-wearing

gana, seated on a jewelled throne. Every doorway led not merely into another chamber, but another mandala! Past fifteen dwarapalakas, to each of whom they bowed, came Vishnu and the devas and into Siva's presence. When they saw Krishna was already there, they were confused and apprehensive.

Adroit as ever, bowing to Brahma and Vishnu and with a smile that no one but Siva saw, Krishna said, "My friend Sudama has been born as an asura and he terrorises the devas. It is time he was killed and returned to me."

At which, the devas cried together, in a babble, that it was true! Finally, Vishnu said more quietly, "Siva, only you can kill the Danava who wears Krishna's kavacha."

Siva said, "Go to Kailasa in the world and ask Rudra to help you."

He raised his hand in blessing and suddenly they were no longer in the palace of many dimensions, but on a mountain slope above the world of men, on Kailasa, near Rudra's home. They bowed to Rudra in his cave and Indra said, "Mahadeva, save us from Shankhachuda."

Rudra said like soft thunder, "His time has come, Devas, I will kill the Danava."

Siva sent Pushpadanta, lord of the gandharvas, to Shankhachuda. Even that ageless gandharva, who had seen the worlds' wonders, stood agape when he was ushered into Shankachuda's court.

"Great King, I bring a message from Rudra. Siva says, 'Give back their kingdom and authority to the devas, for they have sought refuge in me. Or else, meet me on the field of battle.'"

Pushpadanta waited for the august Danava's answer. Shankhachuda said, "I am amazed he dares challenge me. Tell him my heroic asuras will enjoy the earth and I am anxious to meet him on the battlefield."

The Demon's laughter rang through the opulent hall. Pushpadanta said, "O Emperor, listen to me. Siva is not just a deva, he is much more. You can never stand against Rudra in battle. He is the end of time, the God of Gods. Return what is theirs to the devas. Take yourself to patala where you belong and live there in peace. Or terror will strike you down."

Shankhachuda snarled, "Tell Siva I will fight him."

When he heard the Danava's message, Siva said, "Let my sons set out with my army of ganas. Let Nandin, Virabhadra and the eight

Bhairavas march with them. Let Bhadrakaali go with her legions. I go now to kill Shankhachuda!"

That army had Karttikeya and Ganapathy at its head. Virabhadra, Nandin, Mahakaala, Subhadra, Visalaksha, Bana, Pingalaksha, Vikampana, Virupa, Manibhadra, Baskala, Kapila, Dirghadamshtara and a thousand other gana generals as mighty, were in its ranks. This army set out from Kailasa to confront the legions of the Emperor of the worlds. Vikara led a hundred thousand ganas, as did Tamaralochana, Kalankara, Balibhadra, Kaalajiva, Kutichara, Balonmatta, Rangaslaghya, the vicious Durjaya, the savage Duragama and many more!

At the head of unimaginable phalanxes, the careful Sankakarna marched, Kekaraksha and Vikrita, the terrible Visaka, Pariyatrika, Sarvantaka and glorious Vikatanana, Jalaka, Samada, Dundubha, Kalaraksha, Sandaraka, Kunduka and Kundaka. Vistambha was part of that oceanic, horrible army, Pippala and Sannada. Avesana went with that force, Chandrapatana, Mahakesa, the valiant Kundin, the auspicious and gigantic Parvataka, the ancient Kaala and Kaalaka, the fierce Agnika, the blazing Aditya and Ghanavaha and countless more come to Siva's banner from across the worlds: all ash-smeared, wearing holy rudraksha into battle and matted jata for crowns.

The eight Vasus marched with Siva, the twelve Adityas, Indra, Agni, Soma, Viswakarma, the Asvins, Kubera, Yama, Nirriti, Vayu, Varuna, Budha, Mangala and even Kama. Another army went beside this one: one that not the ganas dared come too near though it was an allied force. At the head of that force, went Bhadrakaali in a jewel-studded vimana, as easy through time as space. She wore vivid crimson clothes, a crimson garland of jungle blossoms around her neck and she had smeared her body, as black as sunless space, with unguents crimson as blood. She was utterly lovely and depraved. She danced, sang, laughed lewdly and was in a great mood for the killing to come.

Her tongue was a yojana long and it was never still. In her thousand hands, she carried sankha and gada, chakra and sword, a lotus, a leather shield, bows and arrows, a round skull, a trisula that scraped the sky, a spear longer than her tongue, an iron club, a thunderbolt and all the weapons of all the devas, the mahavira, the saura, the kaalakaala, Yama's danda, the samartha and the mahanala weapons, among numberless others. She came to battle at the proud head of six million yoginis and dakinis.

Tens of thousands of bhutas in their monstrous swarms marched in Siva's army: pretas, pisachas, kusmandas, brahmarakshasas, vetalas, yakshas, nagas, gandharvas and kinnaras. Glorious Karttikeya rode before this sea of uncanny warriors, at Siva's side and Ganapathy as well. Rudra marched until he came to the foot of a marvellous pipal tree on the banks of the Chandrabhaga, where he waited for Shankhachuda,' said Sanatkumara to Vyasa, by now lost among the Purana's mystic currents."

Says Suta to the rishis of the Naimisa.

FORTY-TWO

The two kavachas

"O Sanatkumara of fathomless intellect, what happened next?' Vyasa asked the ancient pauranika.

As absorbed in the timeless tale as his listener, Sanatkumara continued, 'After he sent Pushpadanta back to Siva with his brash message, Shankhachuda went in to his wife Tulasi. "The naked yogin Siva wants war with me."

Chaste Tulasi fell senseless. When she revived, she cried tearfully, "Oh, my husband, you can vanquish anyone in battle, but how will you fight Siva? He is the God of Gods, annihilator of universes. He is Time himself. He is the Parabrahman. His one moment is the life and death of numberless worlds; many Brahmas and Vishnus live and die during one day of Siva's. Oh, Shankhachuda, you do not know who you mean to fight."

Though he comforted her tenderly, he only laughed at her fears. "All this is just women's tales. In battle, your husband is the master."

He would not let her speak any more about Siva. With a hundred caresses, he seduced her into love, which lasted all night. Though she began in anxiety and sorrow, soon desire overwhelmed her. Dawn came before they knew it, the time for him to leave. She wept again in his great arms and begged him not to go to this war, or she would never see him alive again. He would not listen to her.

He said, "Speak auspicious words to me before I set out, my love: not because I can be defeated in battle but for your own peace while I am away. I will tell you a secret, which I have told no one before. I have Brahma's boon that as long as I wear Krishna's kavacha and as long as you are true to me, neither age nor death can come near me."

Then, though she was still distraught because her tapasvin's mind knew a little of Siva, he left her in her bed at the Brahma muhurta. As usual, he made his ritual offerings to his victims, the devas. Donning his supernal armour, he went to war at the head of eighty-six battle-honed legions. Kankas at arms, the fifty Asura families, the hundred families of

Dhaumras, the Kaalakeyas, Mauryas, Daudhras and Kaalakas marched with him. These were lords of the worlds, armed with ayudhas of agni, dark astras and fell sorceries. With three hundred thousand aksauhinis of danavas, daityas and rakshasas, Shankhachuda went to battle, riding in a chariot of the firmament.

To holy Bharatavarsha, he came with his army: to the east of the western ocean, west of the Malaya mountain, north of Srisaila and south of Gandhamadana, to the banks of the transparent Pushpabhadra, to Kapila's asrama with an ancient and sacred pipal tree, where many a rishi had found nirvana. Shankhachuda saw Siva's army there.

The Demon sent a messenger to Siva and that danava general found Rudra bright as a star at the foot of the old pipal. Siva sat in padmasana with a smile on his lips, his eyes shut in dhyana, utterly peaceful and his body like crystal through which transcendent light shone clear. Clad in tiger-skin, the trisula and khatvanga in his hands, alight with the immortal joy within him, sat Siva, seed of the universe. The danava alighted from his vimana and bowed respectfully and with some anxiety, to Rudra. "Lord, I am Shankachuda's messenger. My master asks what you truly want that you have come to war against us with such an army."

"Tell Shankhachuda that, in my memory, he was not always an asura. I remember him as a friend of Krishna's, a gopa that Radha cursed. Yet, he hates the devas like a true danava. Tell your master I said he should remember himself. For I know that, with Krishna's blessing, he has perfect recollection of his past lives. Tell him he should put aside his malice and return their kingdom to the gods."

As his king had instructed him, the messenger said, "Should only the asuras put aside their malice? What about Madhu and Kaitabha, whom Vishnu slew? What about the Tripura and the innocent Bali? And Hiranyaksha, Sumbha and Nisumbha and countless others? What about the deceit with the amrita? Siva, you know the enmity of the devas and the asuras is eternal. Sometimes the devas rule and at others we. But, Rudra, it is shameful that you come to fight for the devas. For you, O Mahadeva, are our God as well as theirs. Win or lose, you cannot have honour from this battle: it is against your own bhaktas that you fight."

Siva laughed gently. "Tell your master, Siva says: Shankhachuda, none of the asuras I have vanquished in the past has been your equal.

There is no shame in my taking the field against you. Let us have no more talk, Danava, but war."

Conches rang across the field, five yojanas wide and five hundred long; drums rolled resoundingly. Heroes' roars shook the earth as, weapons aloft and glinting, the two hosts rushed at each other. Mahendra locked with Vrishaparva, Bhaskara with Viprachitti, Vishnu with Dambha, Kaala with the asura Kaala, Agni with Gokarna, Kubera with Kaalakaya, Viswakarman with Mayaa, Mrityu with Bhayankara, Yama with Samhara, Varuna with Kaalambika, Vayu with Chanchala, Budha with Ghataprishta, Shanaischara with Raktaksha, Jayanta with Ratnasara, Dharma with Dhurandara, Mangala with Ganakakasha, Vaisvana with Sobhkara, Kamadeva with Pipita: maces flashing, long swords and short, daggers, pattisas, bhusundis, mudgaras, spears, javelins of deadly light, parighas, axes, tomaras and bright clouds of many-coloured arrows in the clear day.

The twelve Adityas fought Gokamukha, Churna, Khadga, Dhumra, Samhala, Visha and Palasa. Mahanami fought Ugrachanda. The Vasus fought the Varchas and the Asvins the demonic Diptimantas. When ordinary weapons fell useless around the incomparable warriors, unearthly astras hummed through the air. Luminous shaktis and shatagnis cut through columns of soldiers, horse and elephant, in thick flashes; while head and limb of man and animal flew off their trunks and blood in copious sprays drenched everything around.

The earth was grisly with severed heads, transforming the landscape like some bizarre rock fall. The field was strewn with arms, legs, hands and feet, all cut off. Headless bodies danced weirdly, with blood bubbling out of naked necks, weapons in their hands still raised to strike down whoever had killed them. For a moment, they danced in death, before they realised they were beheaded and fell.

O Vyasa, the first part of the battle belonged to the danavas and the devas fled back to Siva. Then, Bhadrakali came into the fray: black, ravishing and hideous! Her eyes were like red lotuses, her skin was soft and smooth; laughing insanely, she came among the demons, came as death most horrible. She tore their flesh from them and wolfed it, her tongue darting between her fangs to lick the shreds stuck there. Most of all, she drank their blood greedily, often draining them off entirely while they still lived. When she had grown immense on that field, she thrust

elephants, horses and demons down her throat without favour and chewed on them in delight.

Karttikeya came to battle at Kaali's side and he was a natural calamity. His arrows covered the face of the sun and asuras fell in thousands. Faced with the wrath of Mahamaari and Skanda, the demons fled. Shankhachuda climbed into his flying disk of war, made of diamonds, armed at its side and glowing belly with the strangest weapons and flew into battle.

An unnatural night fell upon the field. Siva's army shielded its eyes and stood staring at the sky. When the Demon discharged his missiles at them, they fled howling back to Rudra, those not killed, stopping their ears and eyes with their hands, falling over the dead and one another. At last, unable to bear the terror, even Nandiswara fled and only Karttikeya remained on the field.

The lord of the danavas struck him with a hundred astras. Karttikeya knew their secrets and turned them to ashes. Shankhachuda hurled serpents of wizardry at Siva's son, glittering hamadryads. As darts dipped in venom, he flung dark trees down from forests of hallucination. He cast mountains at him. But Siva's son turned his body into a thousand subtle dreams on that field and no astra or maaya harmed a hair of him.

When Karttikeya raised his own bow of power to shoot at Shankhachuda, quick as time the Danava smashed his weapon in his hand, with a thought or an arrow, no one could be sure which. Another missile felled Skanda's peacock. Then, shining like a sun and screaming like a tornado, a javelin, given the Demon by Brahma, took Kumara in the chest and he fell spitting blood, dead. With a wail, Kaali, who was gorging and drinking bloodily among the danavas, picked up the limp Karttikeya. She ran with him to Siva, who gave his son life again with a touch.

Virabhadra took the field against Shankhachuda. When the Asura shot an astra down from on high, Virabhadra cooled it with one of his own like a cloud full of rain. Then, with two arrows of fire, he rent the Demon's vimana; he clove his armour and his crown. Kaali came back to the field. She came with a vat of raw grape liquor in her hands, from which she swilled as greedily as she did the blood from her victims' throats. Dancing lewdly, she came to war, her hips grinding, blood and wine dribbling down her jowls.

She did not come alone now. She came with her own selves detached from her body: her manifestations of Durga; Ugradamishtra the fanged, Ugradanda with the staff of death and naked, lustful Kotavi came drunk, gyrating and screaming into war. They picked demons off the field in great handfuls and stuffed them into their mouths like savouries. When Bhadrakaali roared the asuras fell dead around her, their eardrums shattered, their brains deliquesced. The ganas rallied behind Kaali, they fought like conquerors again.

With a roar of his own, to match hers, Shankhachuda flew at her. He shot cold and serpentine narachas at her; but she gaped open her blood-filled maw, swallowed them and belched. She cast an Agneyastra back at him like the flames of dissolution, but he calmed it with a Vaishnavastra. She loosed a Narayanastra at Shankhachuda, a weapon that grew fiercer when it saw its prey. Shankhachuda knew the answer to that knowing shaft. He fell on his face and worshipped it with the proper mantra and the missile turned mild and blessed him.

With another mantra, Kaali invoked the Brahmastra; but again the Danava turned it aside with the apposite worship. Then he fetched out a keening, blazing shakti, a hundred yojanas long and cast it at Kaali. She turned it into a garland of mountain blossoms with a Maheswarastra. Frothing then, with an arcane mantra, Kaali invoked the ultimate weapon: the Paasupatastra. But a voice spoke suddenly out of heaven to her, "Chandika, even the Paasupata will not kill this Danava."

She tossed her head in frustration; she abandoned the greatest astra. With a bloodcurdling wail, she fell on a thousand asuras near her and ate them to assuage her frustration, quaffing the blood spouting from their throats where she ripped off their heads: as from a glass. With the rage of those lives in her belly, she rushed at Shankhachuda to pluck him from his chariot and devour him as well. He struck her through her dark nipple with a Rudrastra formed like a burning sword, with flaming edges and the heat of a star. She stopped with a scream. But then, with a smile, bewitching and lovely despite the raw meat that hung from her fangs and the blood that trickled down her chin, she plucked out the sword like a thorn from her flesh and, rolling her eyes, swallowed it.

Shankhachuda shot a quiver of missiles at her, but she splintered them in fragments. She rushed at him again, shrieking. He vanished with maaya and she could only smash the diamond chariot with her fist and

crush the sarathy, its asura pilot, between her thumb and forefinger like an insect. With a yell, the Danava materialised again and spun a whirling wheel of fusion fire at her. She caught it like a child's plaything and swallowed it, lolling her tongue out obscenely at him. She caught the Danava, huger than a mountain and struck him on the head with her clenched fist and he fell stunned on the ground. Because she was a woman he was strangely embarrassed to fight her hand to hand and tried to flee from her clinch. She picked him up, whirled him round over her head and dashed him on the ground. He rose groggily to his feet and a fresh chariot flew down to him in a wink. He fled beyond her reach in it, bowing to her, she laughing joyfully: just as if she had made love to him!

"You cannot kill him, Kaali," said the voice from above again. "There are a hundred thousand other asuras waiting for you."

Tossing her dishevelled head in resignation, baring her fangs truly as if in love, she went crooning among Shankachuda's army again. Abandoning the Emperor, she swept thirstily on his men, plucking off their heads, swilling their blood as if it were nectar to her. But soon, in sorrow, she went back to Siva and, whimpering drunkenly, told him she could not kill Shankachuda, he was beyond her.

When he heard this, Siva opened his eyes. He uncoiled himself slowly, serenely, from his yogasana. Stepping out from the great nyagrodha's shade, he grew into the vast form of Rudra the Annihilator and even Kaali folded her hands in fear and reverence. When Siva came forth and Shankachuda saw him, the noble Danava fell on his face to worship the Lord. When Siva raised a hand over him in blessing, the Asura gained his diamond craft in a flash and flew up into the sky.

For a hundred years, they fought: the mighty Danava and three-eyed Maharudra mounted on his bull. When Shankachuda shot Nandin with an arrow, Siva struck his bow from his hand with one of his own shafts. When the Danava aimed a fiery javelin at Rudra, Mahadeva caught it deftly as it flew at him and snapped it like a dry twig on his thigh. When the lord of asuras spun a sinister chakra at him, Siva struck it into shards with a bare fist. Shankachuda cast an iron club, heavy as a hill, at Rudra and he made it ashes with a mudra of his hand. The Demon rushed at Siva with an axe; a volley of luciferous arrows stopped him in his gargantuan stride and he fell unconscious among his warriors.

Siva's laughter echoed through the worlds as he made fine war with his powerful adversary. He beat out secret, incomprehensible rhythms on his dumaru; he twanged the Pinaka's string in joy when Shankhachuda attacked him with hazes of astras, billowing like clouds from his sky ship. He blew on his hunting horn so both armies cowered and Nandin bellowed to shame the Demon's trumpeting elephants. Then, in delight, Siva clapped his hands and the quarters shook, the earth cringed and every previous noise from the resounding field was dwarfed.

The Asura found a magic spear and flung it at Siva, but Kshetrapala blasted it into dust with a comet he spat from his mouth. Now Siva struck Shankhachuda with his trisula and the Danava fell, blood on his lips. He jumped up at once and his chest blazed open where the trident had pierced Krishna's armour. From his wound, sprang a monster with burning eyes. No sooner than its torso emerged, Siva gave a resonant 'Hum' and struck off its head with a clean stroke of his sword.

Though Siva struck Shankhachuda down a score of times, the Demon would always get up, grinning, though he was felled with weapons violent enough to raze armies. Shankhachuda saw his own legions decimated by Kumara, who had come to battle again and devoured by Kaali and he was grim. Crying out in grief and rage, near madness, he ran at Siva and locked with him hand to hand.

As he came, Siva loosed ten Maheswarastras at the Demon, which they say not only burn the body but dispel the deepest illusions of the soul. When they struck Shankhachuda, clad in Krishna's kavacha, they lost their lustre and fell impotently around him. Despairing, Siva seized up his trisula in earnest. A celestial voice said from the sky, "You cannot make Brahma's boon false. As long as he wears Krishna's kavacha and his wife is faithful to him, you cannot kill him even with your trisula."

Siva sighed, "So be it."

At his will now, Hari came to him on that field. Siva said to the Blue One, "It must be done."

Vyasa, shortly after this, an old and shining mendicant visited Shankhachuda, who was exultant at having repelled the Maheswarastras and convinced of his immortality now. The brahmana said, "Conqueror of Siva, invincible Danava, around whom the Maheswarastra falls like a garland of parijatas, grant me a boon today and it will bring you fortune and everlasting fame."

"Ask for anything you want, Brahmana."

"The world says to me Shankhachuda is not mighty, but Krishna's kavacha protects him. Show me they are liars, give me your armour!"

Shankhachuda was startled. But his word was given and he thought, Brahma had blessed him that as long as Tulasi was true to him he could not die. The Demon was surer of his wife's chastity than he was of Krishna's armour. Shankhachuda took off the kavacha and gave it to the wizened brahmana and the grand Asura thought no more of it.

The same night, Tulasi, asleep in her palace, awoke in surprise. She heard the dundubhi of victory being beaten at her gates. She jumped up, ran to her window and saw her husband step out of his vimana. In joy, she rushed to bathe before he finished the rituals of homecoming at the city gates and arrived in her bedroom. She dabbed herself with the musks and scents that were his favourites, she put on a silk robe she had worn when they were first married. Tulasi waited eagerly for her husband, the fragrant betel leaf with camphor ready and she herself entirely desirable.

After what seemed a lifetime, she heard his knock at her door. She ran into his arms and he embraced her, so his precious kavacha cut into her delicate skin. Something inside her gave a lurch at his embrace, but she thought it a pang of happiness. Crying for joy, she washed his feet and peeled his armour and clothes from him, her hands light as butterflies on his body, while he sat exhausted on a throne, his feet in a golden vessel of water. She kneaded him expertly where he was knotted with battle. She drew a steaming bath with medicinal salts and, having anointed his magnificent body with fragrant oils, led him in to it, as shyly and excitedly as if this was their first night together. She dropped her own robe on the way.

In the bath, her exquisite hands were upon him again and he touched her in the scented water so her breath grew shallow. Desire rose in her body like a sun after the long night of his absence. As she traced a hundred kisses down his smooth chest and his belly, she whispered, "Tell me how you have come back alive from a war with Siva. I did not hope to see you again."

Stroking her, stroking her, he lost himself in the legends of her fine body, her flanks, her arched back, the triangle of soft night and peace between her legs of water and fire. He said sadly, "Such killing there was, such killing. He and I fought for a year. Our asuras were all slain by

Karttikeya and by Kaali and still we two fought on. Then, Brahma came to the field to make peace between us; and with all my people dead and you waiting for me, I agreed. The devas have their kingdom back and I have you."

Joining his great hands around her waist, he lifted her up. Then, slowly, as she bit her lip and shut her eyes, he lowered her on to his body so she cried out as he was in her like a dark flame. Tulasi's eyes flew open and a scream was on her lips: she knew by the feel of him inside her that he was not her husband. Holding her helpless, he moved her effortlessly above him and thrust at her from below. And who could tell if her cries were of rapture, of horror, or of both, as, so quickly in that frenzy, he spent himself deep in her womb?

He heard her sob, beating her fist on his chest, "Who are you, cheat?"

He was himself again before her wondering eyes: blue and four-armed, stroking her wet hair. With a cry, she tore herself from him and, standing naked and dripping, she cursed him.

"Ruthless, hard-hearted Vishnu, you shall be a stone!"

Suddenly, Siva stood there, glorious. He said to Tulasi, "Dry your tears. Only karma brings joy and sorrow and this is the fruit of your karma of the past: your own tapasya that you have forgotten. Cast off your life. You are Hari's now, let your body be a river of love for him. Be the sacred Gandaki and in bhumi, swarga and patala, be the holiest plant of worship. Tulasi, you will be Vishnu's secret love forever."

After Tulasi's curse, Vishnu became a mountain in Bharatavarsha, on the banks of the Gandaki. With tiny teeth, the insects of the ground carved slow rings of torture into his body of stone; they carved strange and sacred sculptures there. The pieces of him that fell into the river are the holiest of all stones and shaligramas. Thus, Vishnu took unto himself Tulasi's pain at her separation from Shankhachuda, whose wife she had been for a manvantara.

When Vishnu had violated Tulasi's chastity, Shankhachuda, who did not know this, attacked Siva again on the distant battlefield. Now he did not have Krishna's kavacha either. Siva cried to the Danava, "Where is your pretty armour today? Won't you be killed without it?"

Shankhachuda roared back, "I have other armour that protects me, Rudra, a kavacha of love!"

"Are you certain you have not lost that kavacha, as well, in the night?"

"That armour can never be taken from me: it is not mine to give."

"I think it has been given, Shankhachuda."

The trisula blazed in Rudra's hand; it was a thousand dhanus long, a hundred hands wide and terrible. It was Light. It was the universal Atman. It was eternal, pristine and Un-created. Siva whirled it above him, thrice and with a touch of it on Shankachuda's head, made him whispering ashes. In his last moment, the heroic Asura screamed in anguish: before his dying eyes, he saw a vision of his Tulasi in Vishnu's arms.

By Siva's blessing, Shankachuda's skeleton fell into the ocean and every holy shell in the world is made from that great Asura's bones.

Muni, this is a peerless legend; it destroys torment, it confers deep gyana and bhakti. The brahmana who hears it is a brahmana indeed, the kshatriya a conqueror, the vaishya wealthy and the sudra the most excellent of men!' explained Sanatkumara to the avid Vyasa."

Romaharshana tells the rishis of the vana.

FORTY-THREE

Andhaka

"In ancient times, Sanatkumara told this Purana of pristine antiquity to Vyasa, eager to drink its nectar, so it may free him from illusion," says Suta Romaharshana, whose ability makes the listening rishis' hair stand on end.

"Matsyagandhi's son by Parasara said, 'Brahma putra, I am thirsty for the Puranamrita. Tell me more!'

Sanatkumara began again, 'Hear a tale I had from Karttikeya himself. Listen to the story of Andhaka.

Once, for worldly sport, Siva came to Kasi with Uma and his ganas. He made a city for himself there and made Bhairava its master. From Kasi, Siva went on to golden Mandara of the sacred caves. Out on the eastern ridges of that mountain, one day, while he lay under her at long, languorous love, in sudden bashfulness Parvati shut his three eyes with her hands the hues of coral and the golden lotus. A darkness that had never been before fell on the universe. From Uma's tender hands a juice of rut flowed, for Siva's third eye tried to blink open and its heat fired her palms.

With a cry at the plumbless darkness, she snatched her hands away from his face. The drops of that juice, which was both the essence of her and the fire of him, fell onto the crag upon which they lay and a dreadful and inhuman Being stood before them! It was that very darkness, with nowhere to hide, embodied and born blind so he may not see his parents' coition. He was awful to behold, slaving; his swarthy face twitched in reasonless rage: anger because that was his nature. His huge body, born of Siva's night, was deformed, matted locks hung in ugly straggles to his shoulders and his jet-black skin was covered with fine, curly down, like a monstrous baby's.

He stood there in the bent-necked, attentive posture of the blind. Then, he began to sing hideously to himself and to dance disjointedly to his own song. The horrible creature wept aloud and, like a serpent, darted his forked tongue in and out of his lipless mouth. Uma covered her nakedness and cowered against Siva in fear. Siva said gently, "You made

him with your hands, now don't shrink from what you have done. Let us call him Andhaka and let us look after him. Though he is ugly, he is great, too."

A wave of compassion for Andhaka swept Uma. She now saw him by the light that had returned to the world. He was more dreadful than before, snarling and gnashing his teeth. She ordered her sakhis to care for him as her own son. Though he growled like thunder Andhaka offered no resistance.

At this same time, the Asura Hiranyaksha burned with an envy that his wife stoked: his brother, Hiranyakashyapu, had five stalwart sons, while he had none. Hiranyaksha sat in a fierce tapasya in the dead of winter and the blaze of summer, for years, his senses restrained, impervious to the world around him. At last, Siva stood before him and said, "Don't smother your nature so cruelly, Hiranyaksha. Tell me, what will gladden your heart?"

Prostrating himself, Hiranyaksha said, "Siva, I have no son, as all daityas should, a son to inherit my kingdom after me. My brother has five mighty princes. As for me, when I die, how will I find heaven if my family is extinct?"

Siva said kindly, "You may not have a son born of your seed, but a great son you shall surely have. I will give you my own boy Andhaka, as strong as you, Hiranyaksha and invincible in war."

Overjoyed, Hiranyaksha accepted the ferocious Andhaka. What son could be more asuric than this one born out of absolute night? Exultant, he went home with the black boy. So delighted was Hiranyaksha with his son that, to celebrate, he conquered the devas and dragged the earth down into patala. Vishnu came as the Boar Varaha, which contained all yagnas and all living beings in feral amsa. Stamping and burrowing, he broke open the earth. He dived down into patala and with hooves of lightning trampled the demon armies that confronted him. He severed Hiranyaksha's head from his body with the Sudarshana chakra. Then, upon his curved tusks, Vishnu lifted bhumi back to the surface.

After he killed Hiranyaksha, Vishnu crowned Andhaka king of the asuras. When Hiranyakashyapu was also slain by the Narasimha from the pillar, people said, "What will a blind man do with a kingdom?"

Andhaka's cousins, Prahlada and his brothers, decided he was neither born nor fit to be a king and they usurped most of his kingdom. Andhaka

was broken and went into the forest for tapasya. He stood on one leg for a thousand years, arms raised over his head, chanting secret mantras as if they were his very breaths. During the last year of his penance, when every other mortification was exhausted, each day, good Vyasa, Andhaka sliced off a piece of his flesh and offered it, dripping blood, into the sacrificial fire. At the end of the year, only the ceaseless mantra supported his life: all his blood had leaked away and his flesh been consigned, piece by piece, to the flames.

At last Andhaka decided he would offer his skeleton to the agni. Then, Brahma stood before him and said, "Daitya, choose your boon. What all the universe cannot have, shall be yours."

"May Prahlada and his brothers be my slaves. Let me, who am blind now, have divine vision. Let Indra and the devas pay me tribute. Let not deva or gandharva, daitya or yaksha, naaga or mortal man, not Hari or Siva kill me."

Brahma said, "What you ask shall be yours, Asura. Yet, none that is born can escape death. So you must accept some condition of mortality, however remote."

No more than a moment did Andhaka think. "When I desire my mother, whom I do not know, for my bed, let me die."

Brahma was startled. He frowned, then said, "So be it, Daitya, but use your might only against great enemies. Arise, King Andhaka!"

Andhaka remained kneeling. He said softly, "Touch me with your holy hand, Pitama, give me another body for the one I fed the fire."

When the Creator touched Andhaka, he was handsome and noble and had lustrous eyes that saw the world clearly. With Brahma's boon Andhaka easily vanquished his cousins. Then, in the tradition of all the great daitya sovereigns before him, he marched on devaloka. He routed Indra's army there and forced the devas to pay him tribute. Gandharvas, nagas, suparnas, rakshasas, yakshas and men all served him and Andhaka, born of Siva's brief blindness, was sovereign of the universe.

Wherever he went, a thousand lovely women, from all the races, graced his harem. Andhaka was happy on fresh riverbank and in dense jungle, on austere mountain slope and in his magnificent palaces on earth and in the sky and in the patalas as well □ his tastes were eclectic and his virility was boundless. Not just women, every treasure in the universe the Demon acquired and enjoyed. Mansions, palaces and chariots of land, sea

and firmament, he owned. Rare exotic food and drink, from far and near worlds, he tasted; varied, subtle music and dance he enjoyed. Thus, the years passed in peace and pleasure, because no one dared oppose his power. Surrounded by soft, false friends Andhaka grew bored. He yearned for war and perhaps, in his soul, for death's release: the final pleasure.

He took to philosophy then, though he was no philosopher. He roamed the earth with his daityas and founded a new and bizarre 'faith' of his own, a mad religion of Godlessness. Wherever he found a Vedic ritual or yagna, he desecrated it and forced his atheism on the people. He called himself Mahatma, while he wandered the world in ennui.

One day, when his karma was ripe and the planets in ominous concatenations in the heavens Andhaka came to golden Mandara, where long ago he had been born when Uma briefly shut Siva's eyes. Uncanny recognition stirred in his blood, though he had no conscious memory of the violet ridges of that mountain or the sunsets and sunrises with the beauty of dreams. Andhaka roared in mysterious exhilaration. His lifelong restlessness, his incessant sense of travail and seeking, left him like sleep at dawn. He cried to his bewildered people, "Build a city for me here, I will rule the worlds from this mountain. I do not know why or how, but Mandara is my home."

So they did. One day, out for a walk among graceful cedars Andhaka's three ministers, Duryodhana, Vaidhasa and Hatsi, saw something that made them run back to their king. They cried to him, "Andhaka, we have seen the strangest sight on this mountain. In a secret cave above the clouds, we saw a divine rishi who wears the crescent moon in his jata. He is noble and handsome; his eyes are shut in dhyana and serpents entwine his body. He wears an elephant's hide and a string of skulls around his neck like pearls. His skin is smeared with ashes, his face shines with unearthly brilliance and he wields a trisula, a sword, a bow and a quiver of arrows, a bhusundi and astras.

Nearby, is another being with a fearsome simian face. Armed to the teeth, he stands guard at the mouth of an adjoining cavern. Still more wonderful, Andhaka, is the white and aged bull at the hermit's side and more than the bull, the young woman who sits alone in the second cave. Never, in all our wandering through heaven and earth, have we seen a woman so beautiful. We have become men of vision since we looked upon her face! My Lord, she is not fit to be the wife of a rishi, however brilliant,

but the mistress of the master of worlds. Come and see for yourself, it is your destiny that brought you to this mountain."

Mythic excitement surged in him and Andhaka sent those asuras back to the rishi in the cave. "I am Hiranyaksha's son Andhaka, lord of the worlds, that send this message. Who are you, strange seer, with serpents round your throat and a bull at your side? Who are you, armed like a warrior, yet lost in dhyana? Whose son are you? Don't you know it is a sin to do tapasya near a beautiful woman? Send your wife to me with my ministers."

The rishi replied softly to the Asura, "I am such a lowly one, Rakshasa, that I remember no father or mother. I have come here for the Mahapaasupataavrata. Oh, I am an old and rootless wretch and the world knows my young wife bears patiently with me. She surely deserves only the one that has been everywhere and seen all things. I have become weak from my indulgence in her and I am going away into a vana to sit alone in tapasya. Whatever is mine that you desire you can have, Rakshasa, if you can pass Viraka who stands guard at the cave's mouth."

Baring his fangs when he heard the muni's contemptuous message, specially the mocking 'Rakshasa', to him a great Asura Andhaka roared, "I will have his head and his wife in my bed tonight!"

He climbed to the cave. He attacked Viraka with his great sword of sorcery. But the monkey-faced gana smashed that weapon and sent Andhaka scuttling from battle with a taste of fight as he had never had. Prahlada attacked Viraka, as did Bhaji, Sahasrabhanu, Kujamba, Sambara, Vrita and some more demons. Viraka cut them up and left them to rot among the jackals that gathered dancing among the ghosts of the dead and the slough of blood and severed heads and limbs, which quickly covered the ground where that gana fought.

Within the cave Viraka guarded, Parvati was terrified. Siva had left for the mystic tapovana and the battle outside raged like a war. A thousand asura weapons pierced Viraka and blocked the cave mouth; he fought on. In the dark, Uma cried out to Brahma and Vishnu to help her. They came as women themselves, as Shaktis. And the devas, gandharvas, rishis, siddhas, nagas and guhyakas came with them, as an army of fierce warrior women, bristling with weapons, blasting on sankhas.

Viraka plucked out arrows, swords and spears from his flesh and he stood up to fight the daityas once more. Suddenly, howling and awesome,

Brahma's Shakti, Brahmi, appeared four-faced at his side. With a staff of death she felled thousands of demons as they swarmed in tides at the cave mouth, she struck them down with eerie beams of light. Vishnu's Shakti, Narayani, appeared at Viraka's other side, with her mace and bow, her sword and her splendid chakra. She, too, killed the demons at her great will, razing millions in an eyeflash.

Bidaujasi, Indra's Shakti, stood forth from that cave. Her skin was golden; the sky was her brow. She was a thousand-eyed and she mowed the asuras down with an incomprehensible ploughshare weapon, a gleaming halayudha. Yamya held Death's staff, Agni's Shakti blazed. Varunyi came with a fluid noose with which she strung up a thousand asuras each moment. Kubera's Shakti, armed with a mace and fierce as the fires of the dissolution, was at the enemy like a conflagration. The Lord of the yakshas was a vampire woman, fanged, fearful, a blood drinker. The Shakti of the naaga king had talons with which to rend her victims and she spat venom that made them ashes. A hundred other ferocious Shaktis held the demons at bay, slaughtering them on the mountainside; that army of guardian women calmed Uma in her claustrophobic cave.

Then, dim memories of the horrible pleasures of war awakened in her own blood, Parvati came out herself. She was black as pitch and red-eyed at the cave mouth, howling, shaking her wild tresses in frenzy: eager for blood to quench her fear and her long, long thirst!

For an awful year and a day, Viraka's extraordinary army fought to protect Parvati on the golden mountain. Numberless asuras they slaughtered. Then, even as the war raged, Siva returned. He came rejuvenated after his tapasya in the emerald forest made from his own thought: a tapovana where a moment was a thousand years. He came back glowing, his virtue restored by the Paasupatavrata, the fast of the Pasupati.

When Siva returned, Uma's army of warrior women vanished from Mandara. Only the blood and the corpses on the slopes of the mountain bore witness they had been there. Andhaka sent a messenger to Siva. He sent Vighasa, whose limbs had been shattered by the Shaktis' weapons. Vighasa limped into Rudra's presence and said haughtily, "Let our armies not fight anymore, false and warlike Yogin,' says my master Andhaka to you. 'Thinking you were a sage, I did not call you to battle. Now I say to you, either give up your wife or come out from hiding and let me send you to Yama!'"

Siva replied, "Of what avail are a wife or riches to a feeble man? Your words are fierce, Rakshasa, but I would see your fight as well."

With the reptilian Gila at the head of his army Andhaka attacked. They rained terrible missiles on the cave mouth and on Viraka. Boulders crashed across that entrance and its guardian was sorely pressed. Siva summoned an army of devas and they came at once through the aerial ways, from diverse places. They came by land, air and water, with chariots and elephants, horses and bulls, lions and bhutas. Flying on wonderful deer and magical boars, sarasa birds and great serpents out of cremation grounds and the embodied spirits of oceans, lakes and rivers, they came to fight at Siva's side against Andhaka with the boon. They came with the Narasimha burning at their head!

Such a mountain-shaking battle there was on the sacred slopes of Mandara and in his glassy ravines and white valleys, quickly drenched scarlet with the gore of heroes demonic and divine. It was a brief encounter. Abruptly, Vighasa the asura grew tall as the sky and, stooping down from the sun, yawning wide a chasm of a mouth, he swallowed Siva's whole army. Brahma, Indra, Vishnu, Surya, Soma and all the rest he swallowed; only Viraka was left at the cave mouth. He ran in to Rudra in the fallen gloom, crying, "Lord, Vighasa has devoured your army. Just I am left to fight in the dark."

Siva laughed in the darkness. He began to sing the Saamaveda resonantly and there was light in the world again: for Rudra at his song shone on the mountain like the swallowed sun! Viraka, who saw again by that light, rushed out roaring to fight, with Nandin beside him. As soon as they came, Vighasa swallowed both.

Siva went to war. He went alone and majestic, intoning a bizarre mantra. When the dissonant chant pierced Vighasa's ears, he was sick in his heart, soul and belly. He began to retch helplessly on the mountain of war. He disgorged Vishnu, the devas, Viraka and Nandin and the rest. He had swallowed them by the Saptarishi's ancient curse, when, once, after killing Hiranyakashyapu, Vishnu the Narasimha threatened to blow the universe into ashes with his breath of fire.

Another wild encounter raged. Andhaka's daityas tasted bitter defeat and death at the hands of Siva's army. But Sukra, the guru of the demons, revived his dead with the mritasanjivini and they came roaring out of Yama's clutches to take the field again. At first, the devas were unnerved.

Then, Sivaganas swooped down from the sky on Sukra, bound him like a wild beast and brought him before Siva. Without a word, Rudra swallowed Bhargava.

When Sukra was gone, the rout of the danavas began in earnest. Those that fell now, with arrows through their hearts, or their heads hewn off by the devas' scything blades, no longer rose again. Hordes of bhutas streamed onto the field, tearing the flesh off dead demons, feasting. Drunken, celebrant vetalas danced victory, with spears raised high and wolf packs ranged the mountain, their mouths full of the flesh of the smouldering dead and vultures eager and greedy.

Roaring so the earth shuddered, Vishnu attacked Andhaka with his mace, the Kaumodaki and felled him a hundred times with terrific blows to his head and body. Always protected by his boon Andhaka rose to fight again. The Asura cast trees, serpents and mountain peaks that he broke off and occult astras at Siva, Uma and Narayana. He assailed them with ancient sorceries, dark thunderbolts. The battle raged down from the mountain onto the plains of Avanti, near the Mahakaala forest Siva had created for his Paasupataavrata.

Siva shot the Demon with the Paasupatastra and made a gaping hole in Andhaka's body, from which blood gushed like a mountain spring. Wherever the Asura's blood fell on the ground, a thousand Andhakas sprang alive! When weapons pierced these, wherever their crimson fell on the earth, another thousand Andhakas sprang up. In alarm, Sarva stopped killing the danavas.

Siva turned to Hari to help him. Narayana turned himself into the Revati, river of quenchless thirst. Siva slew the Andhakas again. Now the Revati drank their blood and no more fiends sprang from the dead and dying ones. With ineffable archery, Rudra killed them all, until only Andhaka himself, the Asura born of the Lord's own darkness, remained alive. With a fulminant roar, Siva rushed at Andhaka, impaled him on the Vijaya, his trisula of mystery and lifted him a thousand dhanus above the earth.

His heart pierced Andhaka hung in agony in the sky, while, commanded by the devas, the vengeful elements tore at him, limb, eye and brain. The rain drenched him through to his marrow, then washed away his flesh in strips. The sun dried another half of him so fiercely even his

skeleton was burnt to ashes and fell to the earth in flakes from the trident. Still Andhaka did not die, but hung grimly on to life.

When Siva swallowed Bhargava like a fruit Andhaka's asuras did not rise from the dead any more. Inside Siva's belly, Bhargava wandered, desperately seeking escape. As he roamed there, he saw the seven underworlds: tala, atala, vitala, sutala, rasatala, talatala and patala. Lost and bewildered, he saw all the mandalas of Brahma and Vishnu, Indra and the devas, Aditya and the apsaras. All these miraculous worlds Bhargava ranged with swift magic, seeking a way to return to Andhaka's side. All those realms shook with the roaring from the mountain battle between the asuras and Siva's pramathas.

In terror, Bhargava fell to hymning Siva. His eyes shut, he chanted in a fever, "O You with the infinite feet, forms and heads, O Destroyer, O Auspicious One, O infinite-armed, how do I praise you? O Eight-formed, infinity-formed, bestower of the desires of deva and asura, O fell and awful Siva: give me words with which to hymn you. **AUM!** Obeisance, O Mahadeva, to whom the devas and asuras bow, Lord of all beings, past and future, O tawny-eyed, O strength of us all; O intellect-formed, who wear the hide of the tiger, who spring from the flint sticks of sacred Agni, Lord of the three worlds, Iswara, Hara; O bay-eyed, dissolver of the yugas, who are fire, Lord of the ganas, protector of the worlds, great-armed, trident-bearer, thousand-handed, with time's curved fangs; O Kaala, Maheswara, imperishable, time-formed, blue-throated One, the universe your belly, Soul of everything, purifier, pervasive One, destroyer of death; Brahmacharin, Pasupati, bodiless, bull on your banner, Lord of bhutas, Jatin, of great fame, cave-dweller, deathless, beautiful One; O Siva like the morning sun, dweller in the burning ghat, Umapati, hour of the dissolution, Yogin, Father, Turiya, Bhikshu of the left wing; O complex Siva, the sacrificer and the sacrifice, O Purusha, O golden-eared Deity at the door, O dreadful and compassionate Siva, a thousand times **AUM!**"

As he chanted, Bhargava was caught up in a warm rush of something that had the scent of the beginning of the stars. He was washed along in a soft flood and ejaculated into the light of the world from Siva's most sacred linga! Bhargava stood, hands folded, blinking; three thousand human years had passed while he was inside Siva's body.

Like golden thunder above him, he heard Siva laugh softly and proclaim, "Bhargava, seeing the way you have chosen to come back to us, we shall call you Sukra. And let anyone who worships you have great virility."

Sukra saw Andhaka impaled on the flaming trisula, his flesh all eaten away. He heard that once great king also hymn Siva in a ghostly whisper, calling his hundred names:

"**AUM** Mahadeva, Hara, Siva, Rudra, Pushkara, Sarva, Bhava, Isana, Pasupati; **AUM** Nataraja, Kapalin, Nilalohita, Ashtamurti, Viswamurti, Trilochana, Pinakin, Jatin; **AUM** Purusha, Paratpara, Nilakanta, Mrigavyadha, Suresha, Dayakara, Sukshma, Saumya, Mahaushadhi; **AUM** Puratana, Soma, Alokasambhavya, Sanatana, Jagadisa, Sadasiva, Jagadguru, Parabrahman; **AUM** Aja, Muni, Lokanatha, Shantha, Nishachara, Yugadikrita, Bindusamsraya, Trishulin, Sara; **AUM** Sankara, Anadi, Pranava, Ekatman, Ajneya, Nabhogati, Hiranyavarna, Aghora, Sambhu..."

Sukra saw the Asura drenched in showers of amrita by Siva's blessing. His suffering over, his sin paid for, trembling in love and awe Andhaka knelt at Siva's feet, "I was deluded, Lord, I did not know who you Are. Forgive me that I dared look upon my mother Uma with lust. Oh, Siva, where is the Devi's fury and where am I, a miserable daitya? Lord, grant me your mercy that I be serene in my soul and devoted to you both."

And because his heart was true and because he was their son, Siva and Uma blessed Andhaka, laying their palms on him. They sniffed his head in affection and raised him up as a Lord of ganas. Those that hear this legend and the mrityunjaya mantra, which Andhaka chanted at last, shall have everything they desire in this world and in heaven and moksha thereafter!

Said Sanatkumara of the many voices to Vyasa, my master,"

Says Romaharshana, Suta of genius, to the spellbound rishis of the Naimisa vana.

ANTAH: in the end

On a golden evening of that kalpa, his Siva Purana ended. Vyasa's pupil, the Suta Romaharshana, blessed the rishis of the Naimisa vana and vanished into a sunset the color of blood. The next morning, the rishis were to perform the ritual ablution to mark the end of their yagna. At Brahma's behest, Saraswati herself became a river in the holy vana and flowed there for them to bathe. Shouting her name, they plunged into her waters and offered tarpana to the Gods.

Purified by the Saraswati, they set out for Kasi, on the banks of the Ganga, to worship at the Avimukteswara Jyotirlinga. The cadences of the Siva Purana still echoed in their minds. For days, they travelled and one evening, shading their eyes against the setting sun, they saw the pristine Ganga flowing down the mountain. With cries of joy, they raced one another to her golden currents. They plunged into her: convinced she would wash their sins.

A short way downstream, they saw another group of rishis bathing. As those munis emerged from their immersions, the sky filled with a mass of light, as if ten suns had risen there as one. While the Naimisa hermits stood agape, those other rishis rose bodily out of the river, into the air and were subsumed into the tremendous refulgence. The next moment, the light and they both vanished.

From on high, a voice spoke to Saunaka's sages, "Rishis, that was the jyoti of the Maheswara linga you saw. Hearing the Purana has purified you and a great siddhi awaits you in the next world."

The rishis stood in the river, awestruck. Hearing the Siva Purana from Romaharshana had made ashes of the sins of all their bygone lives and bhakti welled in their hearts like the Ganga herself. In that sacred dusk, they knew even moksha was not far. The voice spoke again to them, "Munis, climb Mount Meru to where Sanatkumara sits in dhyana."

The rishis climbed golden Meru, their hearts alight with a huge intimation of adventure, of mystery. High on that mountain and wide as a small sea, was a lake called the Skandasaras. Their bodies airy, they climbed to the Skandasaras on feet light with faith. They saw the deep lake through which light passed unbent, it was so clear. Slabs of unearthly

crystal paved its shores. Incandescent flowers, out of dreams, bloomed on its banks and upon its water lotuses of another world floated.

So blue was that water, the sky seemed to have fallen into it. Steps made of the darkest turquoise led to the edge of the lake. The rishis climbed down in soft exhilaration and gathered lotus, lily and holy water in leaf cups for their worship. Unperturbed herds of golden deer drank where the hermits bathed and offered worship. The chill water enlivened their spirits. They heard karandava, sarasa and koyal calling on the lake of wonder, while, in rustling whispers, the water spoke back to bird and deer.

When they climbed up again to a place of vantage above the Skandasaras, with a cry, Saunaka pointed to its northern bank. There an unearthly luminescence seemed to grow out of the rushes, casting its aura high into the air. Sanatkumara sat under a kalpa vriksha, the last of its kind growing on earth in that age. Other rishis and yogins were adoring Brahma's son, just awakened from samadhi.

Saunaka's munis ran around the lake and prostrated themselves at his feet. The radiant one asked, "What brings you here, my children?"

Saunaka told him about the Purana they heard in the Naimisa vana, of the tower of light they saw over Kasi and the voice that had sent them here. Sanatkumara raised a hand over them in blessing. The sky erupted with the tumult of a dundubhi. When they looked up, the living azure was lit by another sun risen there. A vimana like a jewel, an immense ship of the firmament, ringed by a hundred lesser ones, flew down at thought's blinding speed until it filled the sky. It was reluctant and so alive it seemed to breathe.

The air was full of heavenly music. The sages saw mighty Sivaganas in the splendid vimanas, apsaras of impossible beauty, Rudra women, siddhas, Brahmarishis, gandharvas tall and long-haired, yakshas with luminous skins, charanas, kinnara fauns and grave centaurian kimpurushas: divine beings all. Between crystal panels that covered the great vimana, Saunaka's munis saw a golden banner with a fighting bull emblazoned. At the helm of that ship sat Nandin, Lord of the Earth, in his human form, his wife Suyasa beside him.

He was three-eyed and held a trisula. They knew that, in his Master's name, he wielded absolute power over the rulers of the stars! Behind the Gana lord, they fancied an immense and glowing Shadow stood, a crescent

moon in its matted locks, a serpent king round its blue throat; but they could not be certain it was there at all.

Crying out in an ecstasy, Sanatkumara threw himself on the ground before the vision in the sky. Nandin raised his hand in a blessing. Sanatkumara said, "These rishis of the six clans performed a yagna in the Naimisa vana. They have come here at Brahma's instance."

Nandin beckoned serenely and, by a beam of light from his hand, the rishis rose into the chariot of the sky. As they flashed away starwards, like time, with a look from his eye Nandiswara cut away their paasas, the silvery umbilici that bound them to the earth with vestigial memories of a thousand lives. Oceanic freedom overwhelmed the sages: the bliss of moksha and the knowledge of Siva, the Auspicious One.

AUM Namah Sivayah AUM Namah Sivayah

AUM Namah Sivayah

AUM Shanti Shanti Shanti

AUM Shantihi AUM

